
~~The~~ R. Israel ba'al Shem Tov: An Annot. Transl. of Keter Shem Tov

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**THE ORIGINS OF HASIDISM AS REFLECTED IN
THE TEACHINGS OF RABBI ISRAEL BA'AL SHEM TOV**
An Annotated Translation of Selected Passages
From *Keter Shem Tov*

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I. DIGEST

Hasidism has been one of the most explosive and persistent revivalist movements in Jewish history. Its social and spiritual dynamics have fascinated scholars over the past sixty years,¹ but there has been little agreement over the exact causes of the movement's origins and success. Many of the prevalent theories, based primarily on social and economic factors, have been disproved by modern scholarship only in the past decade.² While these factors may have provided the potential for Hasidism to emerge, they did not necessarily produce it as had been suggested by earlier scholars.

The aim of this rabbinic thesis is to take a closer look at the origins of Hasidism as reflected in the teachings of R. Israel Ba'al Shem Tov (c. 1700-1760), who is credited as being the founder of the movement. There are two aspects of the above statement that deserve clarification. First, the word "reflected" is intended to suggest that the ideological origins of Hasidism did not begin with, nor were limited to, the teachings of the Besht (as Rabbi Israel is generally known.) Most of his ideas, if not all, were derived from earlier rabbinic and kabbalistic sources. What makes his teachings of particular significance, however, is the unique way in which he drew those ideas together in order to respond to the spiritual needs of his time and place. Elements of later Hasidism that did not develop until a generation or two after R. Israel's death are also reflected in his teachings, albeit in latent form. For example, the institution of *tzaddikism*, though founded by disciples of R. Israel's successor, was nothing less than an extension of his views on the role of the *tzaddik*.³

¹ Gershom Scholem, one of the pioneers in the academic study of Jewish mysticism, delivered a series of lectures at the Jewish Institute of Religion in New York in 1938. These lectures were later expanded and published as his most famous work, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*.

² Green, Arthur, "Early Hasidism: Some Old/New Questions," in *Hasidism Reappraised*, pp. 441-442.

³ See *Ma'amarim* (Sayings) 5 (pp. 43-44) and 8 (p. 48).

The other aspect of the above statement to be clarified pertains to the word “teachings.” The most widely read works of Hasidic literature are tales of the early masters. This literary genre, popularized by Buber in the early twentieth century, has immediate and broad appeal to diverse audiences. The homiletical literature, on the other hand, is much more difficult to access. It is highly dependent upon exegesis of Scriptural text and is interwoven with numerous quotations from Talmudic and later literature. The extensive use of kabbalistic sources is even more problematic. Although this genre of literature is largely ignored in Reform Jewish circles, it offers a rich source of non-theistic ideas and approaches to spirituality that are remarkably compatible with a post-modern worldview.

More than social and economic factors, I hope to demonstrate that it was Rabbi Israel’s unique synthesis and application of existing religious ideas, as expressed in his teachings, that are primarily responsible for the growth and success of a movement he was later credited with having founded. With regard to the success of Hasidism, Professor Moshe Idel writes:

“It’s vitality derives not so much from the fact that it provided an effective answer to a certain historical situation, but from its ability to exploit the achievements of previous generations of Jewish mystics, who had supplied the stones out of which a new mystical edifice could be built.”⁴

In translating and analyzing an original anthology of Rabbi Israel’s teachings, I also hope to generate greater interest in, and access to, the homiletical literature of the early Hasidic movement. We, as Reform Jews, may find it a useful resource in the revitalization of our own movement.

⁴ Idel, Moshe, *Hasidism: Between Ecstasy and Magic*, pp. 18-19. (emphasis is mine.)

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INTRODUCTION

THE ORIGINS OF HASIDISM AS REFLECTED IN THE TEACHINGS OF R. ISRAEL
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INTRODUCTION

THE ORIGINS AND SUCCESS OF THE HASIDIC MOVEMENT

Hasidism, or “the new Hasidism” as it was known when it first began,¹ originated and developed in its earliest stages in mid-eighteenth century Poland. Within a few decades it grew to embrace tens of thousands of adherents and became a massive folk movement. By the early nineteenth century it dominated Eastern European and only continued to spread. The impact of Hasidism even made its mark on its antagonists who came to be known as the *mitnagdim* or “opponents” of the movement.

Internally, Hasidism effectively consolidated the masses of its followers into new social frameworks, creating its own distinct religious ideals and practices and giving new vitality and meaning to existing patterns of life. It proved able to withstand the fierce opposition of an established rabbinic leadership, demonstrating tremendous strength and stability. Although its dynamics have changed considerably over the past two centuries of its existence, Hasidism as a movement is still a major force in the Jewish world and continues to grow in size and strength.

Numerous theories have been proposed to explain its explosive growth and unparalleled success. Many of the prevalent theories, based primarily on social and economic factors, have been disproved by modern scholarship only in the past decade. For example, there is little doubt that the movement’s origins and growth were related to external conditions – two in particular being the fiasco of the Shabbatean movement and

¹ Dinur, “The Origins of Hasidism and Its Social and Messianic Foundations,” in *Essential Papers on Hasidism*, pp. 86 and 172, n. 1.

the withering of Jewish self-government in Poland. However, these conditions provided only the potential for Hasidism to emerge; they did not necessarily produce it as had been suggested by earlier scholars.² While poverty and oppression may have also been factors, it has been determined that the movement's founders were not champions of the lower classes as they have previously been portrayed. Nor was Hasidism a rebellion of the unlettered, given the scholarly dispositions and achievements of some of its leaders, such as R. Jacob Joseph of Polonnoye and Shneur Zalman of Liadi. It was most likely the complex interaction of many factors that gave rise to Hasidism, but remaining at the heart of the movement throughout each stage of its development were the teachings of its founder, R. Israel Ba'al Shem Tov.

WHAT WE KNOW OF THE TEACHINGS OF THE BA'AL SHEM TOV

In examining the original teachings of the Ba'al Shem Tov, or the Besht (the acronym by which he is often referred), we should keep in mind that he himself never wrote them down. All that we have are a few letters bearing his name, and collections of his sayings that were written down by his disciples and their disciples. This makes it extremely difficult to determine what he actually said and what was only remembered, sometimes decades later, and attributed to him by students who had their own ideological agendas.

The letters of the Ba'al Shem Tov do contain some valuable details pertaining to his life and teachings and were incorporated into the collections of his sayings and life stories written by his disciples. They include a letter to his brother-in-law, Abraham Gershon of

² See Arthur Green, "Early Hasidism: Some Old/New Questions," in *Hasidism Reappraised*, pp. 441-42.

Kutow (published in *Ben Porat Yosef*), to Jacob Joseph of Polonnoye (*Shivhei ha-Besht*), to Moses of Kutow (*Butzina de-Nehora*), to an anonymous individual (*Shivhei ha-Besht*), and to R. Meir *av bet din* of Staro-Konstantinov (*Mayim Hayyim*). Some scholars question the authenticity of the letters, or at least certain passages that appear to be later additions.³

Most of what we know of the Ba'al Shem Tov's teachings is from works published long after his passing in 1760. It was twenty years after his death that his most prolific disciple, R. Jacob Joseph of Polonnoye, compiled hundreds of sermons and homilies which he had learned from the Besht in his works *Toledot Yaakov Yosef* (1780), *Ben Porat Yosef* (1781) and *Tzofenat Pane'ach* (1782). Students of R. Israel's successor, R. Dov Baer of Mezeritch, published other anthologies of teachings and instructions attributed to their teachers, such as *Maggid Devarav le-Ya'akov*, also known as *Likkutei Amarim* (1781; second edition with supplements 1784; third edition 1792). A similar collection entitled *Likkutim Yekarim* was published from the manuscripts of R. Meshulam Feivish of Zborez (1792).

Over the century to follow, works continued to be printed from unpublished manuscripts, such as *Or Ha'emet*, published in 1899 from a manuscript of R. Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev. Others were compilations from existing anthologies, one of the earliest being *Tzava'at Harivash* (1792 or 1793). Many of these publications are similar in style and content, as it seems that manuscripts and anthologies were widely circulated and copied from without any order or system. About thirty-five years after R. Israel's death, Aaron ben Tzvi Hirsch ha-Kohen of Opatow published an anthology entitled *Keter*

³ Rosman, *Founder of Hasidism: A Quest for the Historical Ba'al Shem Tov*, pp. 99-105.

Shem Tov. A much later and more extensive anthology, the *Sefer Baal Shem Tov*, was edited and arranged in 1938 by Simeon Menahem Mendel Wodnik.

THE PRIMARY SOURCE USED IN THIS STUDY

The primary source examined in this study is *Keter Shem Tov*.⁴ At least a dozen editions have been published since it originally appeared in Zolkiew in 1794-95.⁵ The editions used in this study were published in 1973 and 1998 by the Kehot Publication Society, which publishes Hasidic texts under the auspices of the Habad movement. No English translation of this book yet exists.

Keter Shem Tov is divided into several parts, the first containing 248 *ma'amarim*, or sayings, printed in Hebrew. The second part contains 182, all of which vary in length from one sentence to half a page. The third section consists of a large collection of commentaries and *kavanot*, or meditations, most of which are printed in Yiddish. The Kehot editions include appendices providing the biblical, rabbinic and kabbalistic sources for passages quoted in the *ma'amarim*. The 1973 edition also contains critical footnotes, not included in the 1998 edition, citing the location in other anthologies where identical or variant *ma'amarim* may be found.

It appears that many of the sayings in *Keter Shem Tov* were taken from the earlier works of Jacob Joseph. Many of the sayings can be found in other anthologies as well. In spite of this fact, or, perhaps, because of it, some scholars consider *Keter Shem Tov* to be a problematic source for examining R. Israel's original teachings since it includes

⁴ This text was personally recommended to me on 01/28/98 by Professor Moshe Idel, who said it "would be easier and more appropriate" for this project.

⁵ Publication dates for those editions found in the HUC-JIR, Cincinnati library: 1796, 1850, 1854, 1858, 1865, 1890, 1956, 1960, 1968, 1972, and 1973.

traditions stemming the Maggid of Mezeritch and other figures. Furthermore, the lack of a direct connection between R. Aaron and the R. Israel increases the likelihood of the inclusion of non-Beshtian material.⁶

Incidentally, the title *Keter Shem Tov* literally means “Crown of a Good Name.” It may have been intended to signify that the book comprises the “Crown” or the crowning achievements of the Ba’al “Shem Tov.” It is also possible that it was named after a medieval kabbalistic work of the same title written in Palestine by a R. Shem Tov ben Abraham Ibn Gaon.⁷

THE BA’AL SHEM TOV AND HIS SOCIAL SETTING

Before looking at an assortment of *ma’amarim* from the first part of *Keter Shem Tov*, we should briefly consider the life and times of the man to whom they are attributed, R. Israel ben Eliezer (c. 1700 – 1760). Most of what we know about his life is derived from the oral traditions and legendary tales handed down by his pupils. These tales were collected and published as *Shivkhei ha-Besht* (Khpust and Berdichev, 1814-15; *In Praise of the Ba’al Shem Tov*, 1970). Recent scholarship has made it possible to sift through much of the legendary material and ascertain a clearer picture of the man based on more impartial sources.

It is generally accepted that Israel ben Eliezer was born in Okop, a small town in Podolia, and orphaned as a child. He managed to eke out a living first as an assistant in a *heder* and later as a watchman at a synagogue. According to tradition, in his 20s he went into hiding in the Carpathian Mountains in preparation for his future tasks. He was

⁶ A description and structural analysis of *Keter Shem Tov* can be found in G. Nigal’s study in *Sinai* 79 (1976): 132-146. Unfortunately, I was unable to locate this publication.

accompanied by his second wife, Hannah, the first having died shortly after their marriage. There he lived for several years until settling in Tluste around 1730.

In the mid-1730s – Hasidic tradition fixes it on his 36th birthday – Israel became known as a *ba'al shem* (“master of the name”), a title given to the many itinerant healers who wandered through towns and villages writing amulets and effecting their magic through the manipulation of God’s names. Israel, however, settled in the town of Miedzyboz and acquired the distinction as being the *ba'al shem tov*, the “good master of the name.” The circles of his followers and admirers widened rapidly, mostly being drawn by his magnetism and the widespread reports of his miracles. Several groups of hasidim, which had formed earlier, also came under his influence and accepted his leadership to a greater or lesser degree.⁸

R. Israel’s teachings do not indicate any exceptional talmudic scholarship on his part, although he was apparently well-versed in the rabbinic literature. Furthermore, his teachings do not contain anything new that cannot be found in kabbalistic literature. Yet, within a few short years, the confluence of social and economic conditions, his charismatic personality and reformulation of mystical pietistic ideas, resulted in a movement that brought relief to the masses from messianic tensions and social problems that had driven them into depression, if not utter despair.

I have already mentioned the fiasco of the Shabbatean movement, the followers of the self-proclaimed messiah, Shabbatai Tzvi, who sent the Jewish world into a tailspin by his conversion to Islam in 1666. The withering of Jewish self-government in Poland in the eighteenth century further eroded already the strained relations between the rabbinic

⁸ Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, p. 121.

elite and the illiterate masses. Added to these tensions was the social situation in Miedzyboz at the time of the Besht. There was, as historians have long suspected, a wide social gap marked by signs of enmity between ruler and ruled, rich and poor, the elite and the lower classes.⁹ There were other levels of conflict, as well, in the vortex of social confrontation, such as different versions of elite versus elite, artisan versus artisan and poor versus poorer. The array of power relationships and alignments was complex and ever-changing.¹⁰

Within this complexity, R. Israel has often been characterized as an anti-establishment figure who aimed at establishing a broadly based, popular movement. Recent scholarship has determined, however, that quite the opposite was true. Far from being an anti-establishment figure, it appears instead that the Besht maintained good relations with all components of Miedzyboz society. He was supported by the establishment to the end of his days in Miedzyboz, and such support was extended to his son after his death.¹¹ This may have been the beginning of a tradition of hasidic leadership in which the *tzaddik*, or spiritual exemplar, represented a force for unity in an increasingly disharmonious community, rather than an alternative institution appealing primarily to the disaffected.¹²

R. Israel's respected position in society is apparent, not only from various letters and civil documents, but from his own teachings as well. Following are several examples

⁸ Jewish pietism, frequently referred to as 'hasidism,' existed in various forms prior to the emergence of a cohesive movement later designated as 'Hasidism.'

⁹ Rosman, Moshe J., "Social Conflicts in Miedzyboz," in *Hasidism Reappraised*, p. 57.

¹⁰ Rosman, pp. 58-9.

¹¹ Rosman, p. 59.

¹² Rosman, pp. 61-2.

of the doctrines R. Israel was known to espouse that give us a clearer picture of how he viewed his role and responsibility as a spiritual leader:

- 1) The claim that the future redemption of Israel was dependent on the diffusion of his own teaching;¹³
- 2) The demand that a mystic should serve as communal leader and be responsible for both the spiritual and material well-being of the community;¹⁴
- 3) the 'organistic' conception of the relationship between the leader and the community -- the notion that all the constituent parts of the Jewish people function as a single organism and are accountable to one another;¹⁵
- 4) the condemnation of the ascetic withdrawal of the mystic from public life as serving no positive purpose but rather nourishing the divine attribute of harsh judgements and constraint (*din*);¹⁶
- 5) the definition of the task and obligation of the leader as the elevation of the common people to a higher level of existence by infusing spiritual meaning into their mundane lives (the doctrine of 'worship through corporeality').¹⁷

While the Besht clearly saw himself as a spiritual leader, recent scholarship indicates that he never intended to found a mass movement, mystical or otherwise. His teachings were confined to a rather small circle of individuals who had identified

¹³ See M. 1.

¹⁴ See Mm. 5, 8.

¹⁵ See Mm. 9, 15, 18, 58, 116, 133.

¹⁶ See Mm. 39, 219

¹⁷ See Mm. 4, 63, 64, 69; see also Shmuel Ettinger, "Hasidism and the Kahal in Eastern Europe," in *Hasidism Reappraised*, p. 66.

themselves as hasidim even before they met him.¹⁸ It could be said that the Besht's relationship to Hasidism is analogous to Jesus' relationship to Christianity in that neither consciously founded a new religious movement. The ideals they exemplified in their teachings and by their behavior were adopted, developed, and made into institutions by later figures. Only when Hasidism emerged as a bonafide movement, long after R. Israel's death, was the role of a "founder" created by the movement's adherents and opponents alike. In his own time, however, R. Israel would have probably described himself as a hasid like his contemporaries, who introduced only minor changes based on existing precedents.

This does not mean that the Besht was an insignificant figure during his lifetime. In his special role as a respected *ba'al shem*, R. Israel had a firm base in an important community, was active beyond its confines, and enjoyed fame that outlived him. While probably not as well known outside his own region in his lifetime as some figures were in theirs, such as the Vilna Gaon for example, he did have a small following of associates who felt they were helping to spread his teachings after his death, much as the Gaon's disciples did for their master's legacy, or as Jesus' disciples did for his. This legacy, together with the personal contact between the Besht and his associates, inspired profound religious creativity in his name. Those who built the new Hasidic movement into a mass movement utilized both his reputation and his teachings as the foundation of their efforts.

¹⁸Etkes, Immanuel, "The Zaddik," in *Hasidism Reappraised*, p. 160.

THE CENTRAL TEACHINGS OF THE BA'AL SHEM TOV

As was mentioned earlier, there was nothing new in the teachings of the Besht that did not already exist in Jewish religious thought. Any innovations popularized in his name had their roots in earlier kabbalistic literature. What was new was the emphasis given to certain ideas and the conditions that allowed those ideas to take root in new soil. One such idea, which, in fact, became the central doctrine in the Besht's teachings, was the concept of *devekut*, which literally means "adhesion" or "clinging." In Hasidic literature, it means "clinging to God," an interpretation that developed over many centuries, long before the innovations attributed to the Besht.

DEVEKUT

The word *devekut* goes back to the Biblical use of the verb *dvk*. It appears several times in the Pentateuch as an explicit commandment. For example, in Deuteronomy 4:4, Moses tells the Israelites: "*V'atem ha-d'vaykim ba-donai* – Ye that cleave unto the LORD your God are alive every one of you this day." Later, in 30:20, Moses adjures the Israelites to "love the LORD thy God, to hearken to His voice – *ul'davka vo* – and to cleave unto Him..." In these and similar passages,¹⁹ the importance of this command is reiterated, but what is meant by "cleaving to God" is not explained. We can assume it is a call to strengthen the bond between man and God – or at least a demand for devotion to God's will.

In the Talmud, the question is raised several times as to how one can "cleave" to God who is described in Deuteronomy 4:24 as a "devouring fire." According to a passage in *Sotah* 14a, it can be accomplished by the imitation of God and emulating His

attributes.²⁰ Here, what was a verbal expression in the scriptures becomes an abstraction. Another passage is even more suggestive. In a *beraita* in *Sanhedrin* 64a, R. 'Akiva says the following in regard to Deuteronomy 4:4: "But ye that did cleave unto the LORD your God – *d'vaykim mamash* – literally cleaving." The use of the word *mamash* (literally) is intriguing and, in the opinion of Moshe Idel, suggests a distinctly mystical interpretation.²¹

In kabbalistic literature, *devekut* is frequently mentioned as nothing less than the highest religious ideal to be attained. Since the thirteenth century, the term has been understood by mystics to imply a sense of close and intimate communion with God. In his classic essay on the topic, Scholem notes that in this literature, *devekut* is generally characterized by three traits.²² First of all, it is a value without eschatological connotations; it can be realized in this life, in a direct and personal way, by every individual, and has no Messianic meaning. It is an individual attainment and private experience.

The second trait that characterizes *devekut* in kabbalistic literature is that, although attained within the framework of this world, it is realized only by the paradoxical means of abnegation and denial of worldly values. Moses Nachmanides, for example, in his commentary on Lev. 18:4, speaks of "those who abandon the affairs of this world and pay no regard to this world at all, as though they were not corporeal beings, but all their intent and purpose is fixed on their creator alone."²³

¹⁹ See also Deuteronomy 10:20, 11:22, and 13:5.

²⁰ Dan, "Devekut," in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, vol. 5, col. 1598.

²¹ Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, p. 38.

²² Scholem, "Devekut, or Communion with God," pp. 204-5

²³ *ibid*, p. 204.

The third trait that characterizes *devekut* in kabbalistic literature is that, although it is a contemplative value, it can be sustained in social intercourse. This is evident in the writings of Maimonides, Nachmanides, and Moses Hayim Luzatto, to name a few.²⁴ In the writings and sayings attributed to R. Israel, it is this trait that gave way to the popularization of *devekut* in Hasidism.

If it is so that none of the above traits were unique to Hasidism, what, if any, innovations were introduced by its founder? It should first be noted that it was not so much the meaning of *devekut* that changed in Hasidism as its place, and this was, indeed, a significant change. The novel element was the radical character given to *devekut* by this change. Scholem maintains that this new emphasis on *devekut* comprises the real difference between Hasidism and Lurianism; the substitution of a private and contemplative experience for the broad and comprehensive action that was the essential meaning of *tikkun*. He credits this phenomenon as being a significant factor in the “neutralization of Messianism” that took place in early Hasidism.²⁵

Professor Idel also claims that explicit mystical interpretations of *devekut* occur throughout Jewish medieval texts.²⁶ Such interpretations seem to have been influenced by Greek philosophical ideas which were discussed widely by Jewish and Arabic thinkers; ideas such as the Aristotelian “union with the Active Intellect,” or the Neoplatonic union of the human soul with the universal soul. By the early twelfth century, the influence of these ideas can be seen reflected in the use of the word *devekut*. For example, R. Abraham ibn Ezra (c. 1092-1167) discusses the “cleaving” of the

²⁴ *ibid*, pp. 205-8.

²⁵ *ibid*, p. 217.

²⁶ *ibid*, p. 39.

individual soul to its supernal source, the universal soul.²⁷ By the turn of the thirteenth century, R. Menachem Recanati writes of a mystical process that occurs: “*c’shehu m’dabek nafsho b’nefesh ha’elyonah* – when one’s being cleaves to the supernal Being.”²⁸

Mystical interpretations of *devekut* evolved further in post-medieval kabbalistic literature. In the fourteenth century, R. Samuel of Acre described *devekut* as an elevation of the mind leading one through the stages of equanimity and solitude to the *Ru’ah ha-Kodesh* (Holy Spirit) and prophecy.²⁹ By the sixteenth century, Isaac Luria prescribed special meditations that could help one achieve *devekut* and thus attain religious perfection.³⁰ But it was among Luria’s contemporaries in Safed, particularly Moses Cordovero and his school, that an intense interest in *devekut* became a central focus. It was perhaps the Cordoverean *Kabbalah* that most deeply influenced the teachings of the R. Israel Ba’al Shem Tov.

In both Cordoverean and Beshtian teachings, *devekut* implies a constant communion with God; a vivid and overwhelming consciousness of the Omnipresent as the sole true reality. The Besht expanded that notion, however, to extend beyond the contemplative realm of prayer³¹ and Torah study³² and include even the mundane activities of daily life.³³ Furthermore, *devekut* was no longer an extreme ideal to be realized only by members of a spiritual elite. It was no longer the last rung in the ladder of ascent, as it was in the Cordoveran *Kabbalah*, but the first.

²⁷ *ibid*, p. 45.

²⁸ Recanati, *Commentary on the Pentateuch*, fol. 37d; cited in Idel, p. 43.

²⁹ R. Samuel of Acre, *Sefer Me’irat ‘Eynaim*, p. 218; cited in Idel, pp. 49-50.

³⁰ “Devekut,” in *The Encyclopaedia of Judaism*, p. 206.

³¹ See M. 28, 81, 198 and 216.

³² See M. 17, 28, 167 and 174.

³³ See M. 8, 15, 17 and 66.

According to the Besht, *devekut* is the starting point of one's religious life, not the end. All one has to do ^(i's) it to take his monotheistic faith seriously. "Faith is *devekut*," he is quoted as saying;³⁴ to be truly aware of God's omnipresence and immanence is the realization of *devekut*. Conversely, to be out of *devekut* is not simply a state of estrangement from God, but a negation of His oneness and all-pervading presence. The Besht formulated this idea in the words of the Torah, *ve-sartem-va-avadtem elohim aherim*, "lest you turn aside and serve other gods,"³⁵ meaning, "once a man turns aside from *devekut* and the fixation of his thought on God, he is considered as one who serves other gods and there is no mediating path."³⁶

Because of his emphasis on the constant possibility of *devekut*, R. Israel did not advocate withdrawal from worldly life and aloofness from society. To the contrary, he emphasized the importance of joy in the worship of God and vigorously opposed fasts and asceticism.³⁷ According to Israel, physical pleasure can give rise to spiritual pleasure, i.e., *devekut*.³⁸ A physical act can be considered a religious act if the one performing it intends to worship God and the path to ecstasy by way of prayer and Torah study is open by all:

"*Devekut*...is the key that opens all locks. And this [advice] – to attach yourself to the words of prayer and Torah – applies to everyone. For every Jew, even the most common Jew, can come to experience the loftiest *devekut*."³⁹

This bold reformulation of ideas may help explain the attraction Hasidism has held for the "common Jew." And in this regard, it is no wonder that many scholars have described early Hasidism as an attempt to bring "mysticism to the masses." In recent

³⁴ *Toledot Ya'akov Yosef*, 195b.

³⁵ Deut. 11:16.

³⁶ Scholem, "Devekut, or Communion with God" in *The Messianic Idea in Judaism*, p. 209.

³⁷ See M. 219.

³⁸ See M. 63.

years, however, such assertions have been rejected.⁴⁰ While the Besht clearly states that *devekut* is possible for everyone, it is not so clear that he intended this ideal to be implemented by the masses – except, perhaps, in the days of the Messiah.⁴¹

Furthermore, a close scrutiny of the individuals who made up the Besht's intimate circle of associates shows that he operated within a small circle of 'hasidim,' or traditional mystics and pietists of the old school.⁴² Scholem, in his assertion that early Hasidism aimed at putting *devekut* within the reach of every Jew, and Dubnow, with his portrayal of Hasidism as a popular, almost vulgar movement, despite the considerable distance between their views shared the same misconception: both were inclined to explain Hasidism at its inception in terms of its later manifestations. Thus we should try to understand R. Israel's teachings in the rather discrete setting in which they were passed on, and not as if they were intended for a mass audience. This is particularly important with regard to the concept of *devekut* – a concept that loses its intensely subjective quality when superimposed onto a larger population for the sake of determining its social implications.

As for the metaphysical implications of R. Israel's teachings, little attention is given to the ultimate stages of spiritual attainment in his doctrine of *devekut*. Despite his pantheistic tendencies, the Besht does not tend to draw the ultimate conclusion that man's individuality is completely effaced at the height of the prayer experience. While such a conclusion may have been latent in his thought, it was only clearly articulated in the teachings of his successor, Dov Baer, also known as the Maggid of Mezeritch. The

³⁹ From the Ba'al Shem Tov's comments on *parashat Noach* in *Keter Shem Tov*, p. 16 in *Hosafos*, #11.

⁴⁰ A. Rapoport-Albert, 'God and the Zaddik as the Two Focal Points of Hasidic Worship,' pp. 299-329.

⁴¹ M. 1.

⁴² Piekarz, 'Hasidism as a Socio-religious Movement on the Evidence of *Devekut*,' pp. 231-32.

closest R. Israel comes to an elaboration of the ultimate aim of *devekut* is to be found in his comments regarding the concept of *yihud*.

Yihud

Devekut may or may not mean “union” in the sense of the mystical union between God and man, but it leads to a state, or rather, implies an action called *yihud*, which can be understood as “unification” or “the realization of union.” The term has not always had a mystical connotation, and it is not always easy to determine what is meant by it. Sometimes it means concentration of mind by uniting all its powers on one focal point. Sometimes, where it appears in non-mystical literature, it means even less – namely, the acknowledgement of God’s unity. In Hasidic literature, the term took on an expanded meaning. If a man “binds his thought to the root of the Torah,” this is called a *yihud*, both because he concentrates on it and brings about a “unification” by making into an organic whole what previously seemed separated and isolated. He becomes “united” with God and Torah by the process in which the core of his own being is bound up with the core of all being. This idea was taken up with great vigor in the radical mystical theology of the Maggid of Mezeritch.

Avodah be-gashmiyut

The doctrine of *avodah be-gashmiyut*, the worship of God by means of mundane or corporeal acts, was touched on briefly in our discussion of *devekut*. As it is an essential element in Hasidic thought, it is worth mentioning here in a bit more detail. It is frequently explained as an interpretation of the biblical verse, “In all thy ways shalt thou

know Him.”⁴³ If it is incumbent upon a person to worship God with all his natural impulses by transforming them into the good, then the realization of such an idea demands involvement in that very area in which these impulses are made manifest – the concrete, material world.

Avodah be-gashmiyut can be understood as an expansion of the scope of “holy service.” Instead of viewing certain specific times and acts as suitable for this “service,” the boundaries of action and time are expanded and themselves become legitimate means for worshipping God. This changes the criterion for the concept of “holiness,” as it no longer recognizes the principle that certain acts are sanctified in themselves; rather, it is the manner in which the act is performed that sanctifies it. Here we are no longer dealing with the rote execution of a sacrament, or performance of a mitzvah. What counts is a person’s spiritual intention, or *kavanah*, and inner experience. Consequently, the horizon of action broadens to include all of person’s actions – even the most elementary – such as eating and drinking, sexual relations, and all forms of work and business.

Contrary to the claims that this doctrine relieves its practitioners of their religious obligations, the call for *avodah be-gashmiyut* is one which makes greater, rather than lesser, demands upon the individual. Flight or insulation from concrete reality, and any contempt towards “corporeal” phenomena, are thus a sin and a closing of one’s ears to the mission to which he is called. With the expansion of the realm of “holy service,” one’s attitude towards concrete reality as such also changes.

While it is possible that this teaching largely contributed to Hasidism’s mass appeal, it was originally not intended to be practiced by the masses. It is a known fact that the earliest circle of Hasidism attempted to classify society in terms of “men of

⁴³ Proverbs 3:6.

matter” (the masses) and “men of form” (the mystical elite). Although it appears that the Besht did not at all intend *avodah be-gashmiyut* to be practiced by “men of matter,”⁴⁴ it was still possible for them to infuse their lives with holiness by way of prayer.

Prayer and Torah Study

According to the Besht, prayer is the most accessible path to God, open to the illiterate peasant no less than to the saint and scholar. It is also the most direct and common occasion for *devekut*, the attainment of which is then said to extend beyond prayer into one’s daily activities.

The Besht was known to exemplify his views toward prayer in his own life and ecstatic mode of worship. His admirers were fond of describing the light and fire that emanated from his person while he prayed, and the countless miracles that were effected due to the extraordinary intensity of his *kavanah*, or concentration. We are told that it was by virtue of his prayer, rather than his intellectual acuity, that he merited his unique attainment of spiritual perfection and his revelations of supernal matters.⁴⁵

The Besht apparently inherited a kabbalistic outlook regarding prayer that was greatly influenced by prayerbooks that followed a Lurianic approach. In effect, this meant that, despite the literal meaning of the liturgy, prayer was not primarily conceived as an act in which God was petitioned to fulfill an individual’s needs. Rather, prayer functioned theurgically, effecting changes in the unseen, higher worlds. Through prayer, one could elevate divine sparks that had been trapped in the material world and, by uniting various components in the higher realms, cause *shefa* (beneficence and

⁴⁴ Schatz-Uffenheimer, *Hasidism as Mysticism*, p. 55.

⁴⁵ *Tzava’at Harivash*, sect. 41.

abundance) to descend into the world from its divine source. Although he adopted this basic model from the Lurianic *Kabbalah*, he seems to have had little interest in the myriad specific details and complexities that characterize Lurianic prayer. Instead, he described the aim of prayer mostly in general terms, focusing less on the precise operations thought to take place in the higher realms and more on the subjective experience of the person praying.

Although the Besht recommended that one pray in solitude whenever possible,⁴⁶ he did not belittle the importance of communal worship. He also placed some value in the common forms of petitionary prayer.⁴⁷ However, he believed that the primary aim of prayer is the attainment of *devekut* and *yihud*, which could be achieved by “entering into the letters of the prayer.” According to kabbalistic thought, the Hebrew *aleph-bet* is the divine language by which God created the universe. Locked within each letter are powerful creative and spiritual energies. The Besht typically describes letters as “vessels” containing God’s spiritual energy or *ruhaniyut*. “Entering into the letters” is thus a contemplative act in which one unites one’s own spiritual energy or essence with the *ruhaniyut* in the letters of prayer. Thus, as the words and letters of prayer “ascend” heavenward, so does one’s own *ruhaniyut* until it becomes united in a *yihud* with the divine, spiritual essence of the universe referred to as the boundless *Ein Sof* (without end).

The technique of entering into the letters of prayer carries over into R. Israel’s approach to Torah study. In kabbalistic thought, the Torah is like a garment that clothes the divine. If one can see through the outer garment, one can discover the inner essence,

⁴⁶ See M. 216.

⁴⁷ See M. 109 and 138.

the truly unpronounceable name of God, that ordinarily remains hidden within each word and letter. According to the Besht, it is this name of God, the spiritual essence of the Torah, which is evoked by true study and worship. Here he gives new meaning to the old Jewish phrase *torah lishmah*, typically understood as Torah study for its own sake, much as we might say “art for art’s sake.” The Besht, however, uses the literal meaning of *lishmah* (“for the sake of its name”) to reflect the more esoteric approach he advocates – to discover the hidden element inherent in the letters and words.⁴⁸

Sublimation of Alien Thoughts

Within the context of prayer and Torah study, the Besht recognized that problem of undesired thoughts that frequently enter one’s consciousness. In response to this problem, he developed strategies and theological positions that are among the most original aspects of early Hasidic thought.

To begin with, the established position in the time of the Besht was that extraneous thoughts are a hindrance to prayer. The goal of prayer is to turn away from the material concerns of ordinary consciousness and to ascend into the spiritual realm. To the extent that the mind is preoccupied by materialistic concerns it is prevented from returning to its spiritual source. Thus the conventional view regarding extraneous thoughts was that they should be rejected. One should forcefully turn the mind to the spiritual objects of contemplation. This strategy made perfect sense as long as the underlying theological position was dualistic. As long as a rigid distinction was made between sacred and profane, between God and the world, extraneous thoughts could play

⁴⁸ Scholem, “Devekut, or Communion with God,” in *Essential Papers on Hasidism*, p. 284.

no role in worship. They were essentially a distraction caused by the “evil urge” in man that a spiritual person was enjoined to reject.

The problem of “extraneous thoughts” was not an important issue for Lurianic kabbalists, perhaps because their manner of prayer involved a highly structured contemplative agenda. The Lurianic *kavanot* presented a comprehensive program of specific objects of contemplation which constantly occupied the mind of the kabbalist as he ascended through the spiritual worlds. Concentration on these precise *kavanot* may have had a side effect of preventing, or at least reducing, the intrusion of foreign thoughts.

One factor that seems to have influenced R. Israel’s approach to extraneous thoughts was his apparent predilection toward the more pantheistic *Kabbalah* of Moses Cordovero as opposed to the dualistic *Kabbalah* of Isaac Luria. Faith in divine immanence was essential in his concept of *devekut* and his belief in the essentially divine nature of extraneous thoughts. If God is to be found everywhere, even in seemingly undesirable thoughts, then the rejection of such thoughts would imply a diminution of God’s power, which in theory must be unlimited. Rather, they can be viewed as vessels containing divine energy that need only be elevated and returned to its source.

Despite his all-encompassing affirmation of faith in divine immanence, the Besht did not infer that all thoughts were, in practice, to be treated as vessels containing divine emanation. In the second part of *ma’amar* 39, a criterion is offered whereby a person can determine whether an extraneous thought should be elevated or rejected. He concedes that two types of extraneous thoughts exist. One type indeed contains a holy spark that is in need of release and elevation. The other is the type known to earlier periods of Jewish

thought, as a weapon of the *yetzer ha-rah* (“the evil urge”) whose intent is to nullify a person’s prayer. The criterion offered for distinguishing between the two involves noticing whether a basis for elevating the thought immediately presents itself. In other words, if the extraneous thought can be immediately related to one of the *sefirot*, it can be elevated to that divine source and thus play a role in the process of prayer. Theoretically, any thought can be considered a derivative of one of the *sefirot*. For example, thoughts of lust may be viewed as remote extensions of the divine quality of love that is rooted in the *sefirah hesed*. Thus the content of the thought is not the issue, but rather whether the relationship of the thought to its root in the *sefirot* is immediately apparent. If so, the thought constitutes no threat to maintaining the contemplative state. However, if the solution does not immediately arise, elevation would require diverting the mind from its contemplative state in order to discursively determine an appropriate divine root. Since maintaining the contemplative state of *devekut* is most important, the second type of thought must be rejected as a potential disturbance.

The Besht did not entirely reject the established position regarding extraneous thoughts. Passages do exist that counsel rejecting such thoughts under certain circumstances and particularly during its initial stages of one’s spiritual development, when contemplation or *devekut* is still weak. Nonetheless, the practice of elevating extraneous thoughts represents an important and innovative aspect of his teachings. As many of the Besht’s opponents viewed the teaching as an extension and further development of Shabbatean tendencies, the practice was frequently attacked as being pretentious if not heretical. Thus it became one of the central points of contention in anti-

Hasidic propaganda. As Hasidism eventually became a popular movement, the practice of elevating extraneous thoughts was de-emphasized.

The Tzaddik

Although the institution of *tzaddikism* developed after the death of the Ba'al Shem Tov, two of its fundamental tenets have their roots in his teachings: the recognition of the existence of individuals (*tzaddikim*) whose spiritual qualities are greater than those of other human beings and who are outstanding in their higher level of *devekut*; and the conception of the Jewish community at large and the mutual responsibility of all members of the nation, as "every Jew is a limb of the Shekhinah."⁴⁹ Within this framework, the *tzaddik* becomes the center of his community. He influences society and is influenced by it. The task of the *tzaddik* is to teach the people to worship God by means of *devekut* and to cause sinners to repent. The *tzaddik* descends spiritually to the sinner, associates with him, and by his own ascent raises him and restores him to goodness, aiding him in purifying himself of his blemishes. The *tzaddik* can also restore and elevate the soul of a sinner who has died. It is related that R. Israel performed such acts to restore the souls of deceased sinners.⁵⁰

Clearly this idea of the descent of the *tzaddik* recalls Shabbatean notions and some scholars view it as a Hasidic transformation of the Shabbatean doctrine of the descent of the Messiah. Whether or not that is true, we do know that R. Israel's doctrine contained none of the later elements of "practical *tzaddik-ism*," particularly the belief that the *tzaddik* must be supported by his disciples. It was left to the Maggid's disciples to

⁴⁹ *Shivkhei ha-Besht*, p. ???

⁵⁰ See M. 1.

take the final step and place this doctrine into a realizable social context through the institution of *tzaddikism*, a connection almost entirely foreign to early Hasidism.

Yeridah Tzorech Aliyah

A principle that was explicitly articulated in the teachings of the Maggid of Mezeritch and only alluded to by the Besht himself, is that of *yeridah tzorech aliyah* – “the descent, or stepping-down, is necessary in order to ascend to a higher rank.” It is derived from the Lurianic myth of the breaking of the vessels, according to which the intensity of divine light given in creation was too great for the lower worlds to bear and the vessel containing the light shattered. The human task, according to the Besht (expanding “Israel” to “humanity”), is to descend in search of these scattered bits of light and to ascend with them, restoring them to their source in God. Of course there is a danger in the descent, namely the danger of remaining in what should be only a transitory stage.⁵¹

Here the Besht takes the Lurianic myth of “raising divine sparks” and internalizes it in psychological terms. While this reinterpretation was used to justify the bipolar episodes of Shabbetai Tzvi and the perverse activities of Jacob Frank, the Besht restored its credible application. *Yeridah tzorech aliyah* in his teachings became the natural ebb and flow in spiritual life that we might describe, in more prosaic terms, as our “ups and downs.” Just as night precedes day in the order of creation, or as the long night of exile precedes the dawn of Israel’s redemption, so do times of darkness alternate with those of light in the life of each individual, “for light is greater when it proceeds from the dark.” Everyone must go through periods of inner darkness (depression, doubt, temptation) in

order to increase the light that emerges in the triumph over them. The more profound the sufferings given to an individual, the higher the sparks that lie within the person's grasp to redeem, if the strength can be found to effect that transformation. Ultimately there is nothing in the universe so irremediably evil, since all comes from God, that it cannot be recovered for the holy.

Personal Redemption

As mentioned earlier in the above section on *devekut*, Gershom Scholem described the new emphasis on *devekut* as the substitution of a private, contemplative experience for the broad, messianic aims of Lurianic *Kabbalah*.⁵¹ More recent scholars have argued that this emphasis was not so new, but existed in the less dominant teachings of Luria's contemporary, Moses Cordovero. In either case, it is true that the emphasis on the personal in the teachings of the Besht replaced a previously widespread preoccupation with messianism and the acceleration of an eschatological era. He felt that the salvation of the soul of the individual must necessarily precede the redemption of the world.

R. Jacob Joseph explained, in the name of the Besht, that redemption operates on three levels, *olam* (the sefirotic world), *shanah* (the physical world), and *nefesh* (the individual). The three levels correspond to the *Shekhinah* (God's divine presence), the Jewish people, and the individual soul. Since the exile of the individual soul occurred first, it is also the first redemption that must be prayed for. It is only after attaining the

⁵¹ See M. 90.

⁵² Scholem, "Devekut, or Communion with God," p. 217.

personal redemption of the soul that one can aspire to the other levels of redemption.⁵³ In other words, one must redeem oneself before attempting to redeem others.

Personal redemption became an integral part of the Maggid of Mezeritch's teachings and his doctrine of *unio mystica*. Many of the Maggid's disciples, notably R. Elimelekh of Lyzhansk, moved away from his elitist individualistic mysticism and gave a new centrality to the concept of the *tzaddik*, a concept virtually absent from the Maggid's own teachings. As a result, the idea of personal redemption disappears from their teachings and is replaced by redemption through adherence to the *tzaddik*. The *tzaddik* became the intermediary through whom all spiritual and physical needs are met. This doctrine reached its apogee in the teachings of R. Elimelekh's disciple, the Seer of Lublin.⁵⁴ In the Przysucha-Kotsk school, which rejected of trend toward popular *tzaddik*-ism, personal redemption remained a central concern, reaching its fullest development in the writings of R. Mordecai Joseph of Izbica.⁵⁵

⁵³ Faierstein, Morris M. "Personal Redemption in Hasidism" in *Hasidism Reappraised*, p. 215.

⁵⁴ *ibid.*, p. 215.

⁵⁵ *ibid.*, p. 214.

**TRANSLATION AND EXPLICATIONS OF SELECTED PASSAGES,
OR *MA'AMARIM* (SAYINGS), FROM *KETER SHEM TOV***

ספרי' - אוצר החסידים - ליובאוויטש

קובץ
שלשלת האור

שער
ראשון

היכל
ראשון

כתר שם טוב

והוא ליקוט דברי קדשו של
קדוש ה', אשר כמוהו לא היה מימות הראשונים,
חד משמי שמיא נח"ת, כבוד קדושת אדונינו מורינו ורבנו

ר' ישראל
הבעל שם טוב

זצוקללה"ה נבג"מ
זכותו הקדוש יגן עלינו ועל כל ישראל אמן.
הוצאה חמישית עם הוספות



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Which is a collection of the holy words of...
May the Holy G-d bless him, whom there is none like since the days of the early sages,
except in the name of heaven.....glory of Holiness of our lord, teacher and rabbi...

R. ISRAEL
THE BAAL SHEM TOV

May his righteous and holy memory be blessed with life in the world to come (*zeicher tzaddik v'kadosh livracha l'chaye haolam habah*)
his soul is in the Geniza on high (*nishmato b'ganzei maromim*)
May his holy merit protect us and all Israel. Amen.

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in the 70th year of His Holiness our teacher and master and rabbi, may he live a long life,
Amen. (*sh'y'chaye l'orech yamim tovim, amen.*)

לוח המפתחות

Translation and explications of 57 selected passages,
or *ma'amarim* (sayings), from *Keter Shem Tov*

דף	סימן	דף	סימן	דף	סימן
הא	אע"פ שאלו אוסרין ואלו מתירין.	בא	אגרת שכתב הבעש"ט לארץ הקדושה.	א	אגרת שכתב הבעש"ט לארץ הקדושה.
הא	בשם הרמב"ן ולא תגעל נפשי אתכם.	בג	כוונת המקור מהבעש"ט.	ב	כוונת המקור מהבעש"ט.
הב	מבואר בכוונת האריו"ל ענין בירורי נצוצות.	גא	ביאור הלואי אותי עזבו.	ג	ביאור הלואי אותי עזבו.
הב	אם אדם רוצה לשבח.	גא	כל אחד צריך להתנהג עפ"י מדריגתו.	ד	כל אחד צריך להתנהג עפ"י מדריגתו.
הב	העושה מצוה גדולה.	גא	פ"י הש"ס יצא ב"ק ואמר.	ה	פ"י הש"ס יצא ב"ק ואמר.
הג	במקום שאדם חושב.	גב	והדבר אשר יקשה מכם תקריבון אלי.	ו	והדבר אשר יקשה מכם תקריבון אלי.
הג	ואשיבה רגלי אל עדותיך.	גב	פ"י ע"פ נשיו הטו לבבו.	ז	פ"י ע"פ נשיו הטו לבבו.
הג	הנהו תרי בדחי.	גב	יפקוד ה' איש אשר יוציאם.	ח	יפקוד ה' איש אשר יוציאם.
הג	דנשקי ארעא ורקיע.	גג	מי שהוא חכם לב יקח מצות.	ט	מי שהוא חכם לב יקח מצות.
הג	שקלי לסולתאי ואנחת' בכוותא דרקיע.	גג	הקב"ה נק' איש.	י	הקב"ה נק' איש.
הד	ויחי יעקב בארץ מצרים.	גד	בספר עץ חיים כשעלה ברצונו הפשוט לברוא העולם.	יא	בספר עץ חיים כשעלה ברצונו הפשוט לברוא העולם.
הד	הנמצא כזה איש.	גד	כי ביי"ה ה' צור עולמים.	יב	כי ביי"ה ה' צור עולמים.
הד	משל למלך שה' לו בן.	דא	ורוח אלקים מרחפת.	יג	ורוח אלקים מרחפת.
הד	בשם רס"ג שראוי לאדם שילמוד.	דא	ויהי כחצות הלילה.	יד	ויהי כחצות הלילה.
הא	המדבק א"ע בחלק אחד מן האחדות.	דא	ג' חילות הן.	טו	ג' חילות הן.
הא	בקשתי את שאהבה נפשי.	דא	כי מבשרי אחזה.	טז	כי מבשרי אחזה.
הב	מלכות נק' דיבור.	דא	כל העושה מצוה אחד מטיבין לו.	יז	כל העושה מצוה אחד מטיבין לו.
הב	מה בין תלמידיו של א"א.	דב	שצריך להתפלל על שונאיו.	יח	שצריך להתפלל על שונאיו.
הב	סוד מרע ועשה טוב.	דב	מ"ש לשם יחוד קבה"ו.	יט	מ"ש לשם יחוד קבה"ו.
הב	וירא ה' כי סר לראות.	דג	ופרעה הקריב.	כ	ופרעה הקריב.
הג	בענין עבודת הש"י.	דג	שנים שנים איש ואשתו באו אל התיבה.	כא	שנים שנים איש ואשתו באו אל התיבה.
הג	בענין מחשבות.	דג	דרש באכסניא של תורה.	כב	דרש באכסניא של תורה.
הד	בענין משל שה' למלך ג' אוהבים.	דד	עוד פ"י בע"א כי עשרת הדברות.	כג	עוד פ"י בע"א כי עשרת הדברות.
הד	בענין כל הגוסל מ' לבד.	דד	עיקר בריאת האדם בעה"ז לשבר מ"ר.	כד	עיקר בריאת האדם בעה"ז לשבר מ"ר.
הד	איך יתפלל על שונאו.	הא	כאשר יודע אדם נגעי לבבו.	כה	כאשר יודע אדם נגעי לבבו.
הא	סוד עירוב אלפים אמה.	הא	מאחר שהשכינה כוללת כל העולמות דצח"ט.	כו	מאחר שהשכינה כוללת כל העולמות דצח"ט.
הא	ביאור משנה הוי זהיר בגחלתן.	הב	ויהי רעב בארץ.	כז	ויהי רעב בארץ.
הב	השוחט דעלמא חייב משום צובע.	הב	מ"ש בס' עץ החיים ענין מצות המילה וחשמל.	כח	מ"ש בס' עץ החיים ענין מצות המילה וחשמל.
הב	אין יחשוב על משכבו.	הד	אתה הוא ה' אלקינו.	כט	אתה הוא ה' אלקינו.
הב	ענין התפלה בח"ל.	הד	הלוך ילך ובכה.	ל	הלוך ילך ובכה.
הג	פ"י ס' וישלח יעקב מלאכים.	הד	ועתה ישראל מה ה' אלקיך שואל.	לא	ועתה ישראל מה ה' אלקיך שואל.
הג	ענין חטא א' שחטא אדם.	הז	ואבוא היום אל העין.	לב	ואבוא היום אל העין.
הד	יום ליום יביע אומר.	וא	לעולם יהא אדם רגיל לומר כל מה דעבדין מן שמיא.	לג	לעולם יהא אדם רגיל לומר כל מה דעבדין מן שמיא.
הא	המכיר את מקומו.	וא	אמר ריש לקיש פעמים שבטולה של תורה.	לד	אמר ריש לקיש פעמים שבטולה של תורה.
הא	אני ה' לא שניתי.	וב	משל פעם א' כעס מלך שבחיות.	לה	משל פעם א' כעס מלך שבחיות.
הב	נודע כי אות א' הוא חכמה ומחשבה.	וב	לעולם יכנס אדם לבהכ"נ.	לו	לעולם יכנס אדם לבהכ"נ.
הב	מכתבי האריו"ל למתק הדינין בשרשן.	וב	ענין מלתא דבדיחות' קדמם הלימוד.	לז	ענין מלתא דבדיחות' קדמם הלימוד.
הג	יש באדם ע"ס.	וג	כי יראה חצונית הבא לאדם.	לח	כי יראה חצונית הבא לאדם.
הג	אם יודמן לאדם שראה דבר עבירה.	וג	א"ר זירא כל האומר שמע שמע.	לט	א"ר זירא כל האומר שמע שמע.
הג	יש בחי' שאחר עלותו למעלה חוזר ויורד.	זא	מי שה' רגיל לדבר שקר.	מ	מי שה' רגיל לדבר שקר.
הג	כל אשר תמצא ידך לעשות בכחך עשה.	זא	פ"י סוד מרע ועש' טוב.	מא	פ"י סוד מרע ועש' טוב.
הג	ענין רצוא ושוב.	זא	כל אשר תמצא ידך לעשות.	מב	כל אשר תמצא ידך לעשות.
הג	כשיש רשעים בעיר.	זא	פ' תלמידים היה להלל בו.	מג	פ' תלמידים היה להלל בו.
הג	ידביק מחשבתו באור א"ס.	זב	ענין הדביקות בו יתברך.	מד	ענין הדביקות בו יתברך.
הג	א"ר אמי מ"ד אם ישך הנחש בלא לחש.	זב	בכל אות נכללו כל האותיות.	מה	בכל אות נכללו כל האותיות.
הג	ענין ד' שנכנסו לפרדס.	זג	לא גלו ישראל עד שכפרו בה' ובדוד.	מו	לא גלו ישראל עד שכפרו בה' ובדוד.
הג	תפלה לעני כי יעטוף.	זד	הקשו התוס' למה הוצרך הקב"ה לכפות ההר.	מז	הקשו התוס' למה הוצרך הקב"ה לכפות ההר.
הג	ויגש אליו יהודה.	זד	כל הדר בא"י דומה כמי שיש לו אלוה.	מח	כל הדר בא"י דומה כמי שיש לו אלוה.
הג	צריך להעלות מ"ז דרך ג' קוין.	זד	כל מה שתמצא ידך לעשות בכחך עשה.	מט	כל מה שתמצא ידך לעשות בכחך עשה.
הג	וארא אל אברהם.	ק	אם כבר בא לידי נסיון.	נ	אם כבר בא לידי נסיון.

קא	וגם הקמותי את בריתי אתם..... ידא	קנא	יש דעייל ונפיק..... יטב
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קד	ואלה שמות ב"י..... ידא	קנד	למה ע"י מכת בכורות..... כב
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קי	ויהי בשלח פרעה את העם..... ידד	קס	ביאור סוד א"ב..... כאא
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קיג	כשרוצין ליפרע העונש ממי שהוא ראוי לעונש..... מוב	קסג	ויאמר אל שרי אשתו..... כאב
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קיו	משל למלך שה' ממונה על אוצרו ד' שרים..... טוד	קסז	בדורותנו שאנו במעט השכל..... כאד
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קכא	ענין החיות רצוא ושוב..... טזא	קעא	איזהו גבור הכובש את יצרו..... כבא
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קלא	את אשר יאהב ה' יוביח..... יזא	קפא	ביאור קושי' דשמעון העמסוני..... כגג
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רא.	כשאדם עובד תמיד. כו.א
רב.	להבין מהו קטנות. כו.ב
ר.ג.	גם יחשוב כשישב ללמד. כו.ב
רד.	העוסק בתורה לשמה. כו.ב
ר.ה.	הלואי שיהי' מורא שמים עליכם. כו.ג
ר.ו.	אין כאלקיננו. כו.ג
ר.ז.	יראה חיצונית. כו.ד
ר.ח.	חומר בקודש. כו.א
ר.ט.	שש אנכי על אמרתיך. כו.ב
ר.י.	יעקב ראה בעיני השכל. כו.ב
ר.יא.	צריך האדם להעלות הדיבורים. כז.ג
ר.יב.	ענין איסור. כז.ג
ר.יג.	כל תורה שאין עמה מלאכה. כז.ד
ר.יד.	חשב ה'. כז.ד
ר.טו.	כשאדם טובע. כח.א
ר.טז.	צריך שירגיש במחשבתו. כח.א
ר.יז.	ירגיש בשבת תוס' נפש. כח.ב
ר.יח.	התורה חסה. כח.ב
ר.יט.	אמרו עליו על ריב"ש. כח.ג
ר.כ.	שויתי ה' לנגדי תמיד. כח.ג
ר.כא.	האדם צריך ללמוד. כט.א
ר.כב.	כאשר בא לאדם מ"ז. כט.א
ר.כג.	כשמתענה אדם. כט.א
ר.כד.	יהי' זהיר מאד. כט.א
ר.כה.	סיג לחכמה שתיקה. כט.א
ר.כו.	ארז"ל אור אלו מעשיהם כו'. כט.ב
ר.כז.	יחשוב שבתפלתו הולך מהיכל להיכל. כט.ב
ר.כח.	צריך אדם לידע כלל גדול. כט.ג
ר.כט.	התפלה כשהיא בשמחה. כט.ג
ר.ל.	הבוסח בה' חסד יסובבנו. כט.ד
ר.לא.	כאשר גופו חולה. כט.ד
ר.לב.	זהו מדריגה גדולה לאדם. כט.ד
ר.לג.	פעמים יש לעבוד השי'. כט.ד
ר.לד.	גבורי כח עושי דברו. ל.א
ר.לה.	המהלך בדרך יחידי. ל.א
ר.לו.	הורני ה' דרכך. ל.ב
ר.לז.	עונש הצדיקים בעה"ז. ל.ב
ר.לח.	האדם אע"פ שיש בו גדלות. ל.ב
ר.לט.	כמיעוט תענוג. ל.ד
ר.מ.	יהי' מופשט מגשמיות. לא.א
ר.מא.	נעשה אדם. לא.ב
ר.מב.	כי תורה חדשה מאתי תצא. לא.ג
ר.מג.	בכתבים . . בשם ר' בער ז"ל. לא.ג
ר.מד.	הזהר בגחלתן שלא תכוה. לא.ג
ר.מה.	האלקים נסה את אברהם. לא.ד
ר.מו.	כי שמש ומגן ה' אלקים. לב.א
ר.מז.	ויאמר אלקים יהי אור. לב.ב
ר.מח.	י"ז תנאי המצות. לב.ב

Ma'amar 1

The only writings left by the Ba'al Shem Tov are a few letters bearing his name. While their authenticity is debated by scholars, these letters have been elevated by Hasidim to the level of sacred literature. As mentioned earlier, they have been incorporated into various collections of teachings attributed to the Besht. What is, perhaps, the most famous letter, written to his brother-in-law, Rabbi Abraham Gershon of Kutow, was reproduced as the very first *ma'amar* in *Keter Shem Tov*.

This letter, or epistle, first appeared in the work *Ben Porat Yosef* by Jacob Joseph of Polonnoye. The work was published in Koretz in 1781, some twenty years after the death of the Ba'al Shem Tov. The letter was originally given by the Ba'al Shem Tov to Jacob Joseph to be delivered to R. Abraham Gershon, who was at the time in Palestine. Jacob Joseph, however, failed to realize his plan to journey to the Holy Land and the epistle was thus never delivered. The caption to the letter in the Koretz edition of *Ben Porat Yosef* reads:

This is the letter which the Rabbi, Israel Ba'al Shem Tov, his memory be for the life of the world to come, gave to our teacher, the author of this book, Rabbi Jacob Joseph haKohen, to deliver to his brother-in-law, Rabbi Gershon Kitover, who was at that time in the Holy Land. But through a hindrance brought about by God, blessed be He, he did not journey to the land of Israel so that it remained with him in order to bring merit to our people the children of Israel.⁵⁶

Numerous editions of the letter, with all sorts of variations, have been published. The edition in *Keter Shem Tov* is only a portion of the longer version printed in *Ben Porat Yosef*. In the latter edition, Rabbi Israel begins with personal greetings and miscellaneous matters and ends with tearful apologies for his inability to travel to Israel himself or to send money. We also find two sections in the description of his celestial

⁵⁶ *Ben Porat Yosef*, p. ____

“ascent of the soul,” as well as a description of a second ascent which occurred on *Rosh Hashanah* three years later, that are not included in the *Keter Shem Tov* edition. Following is the text of the famous epistle as it appears in the first *ma'amar* of *Keter Shem Tov*:

א

העתק האגרת שכתב הרב הקדוש ר' ישראל
בעש"ט ולה"ה לארץ הקדושה
בר"ה שנת תק"ז עשיתי השבעת
עליית הנשמה כידוע לך וראיתי
דברים נפלאים במראה מה שלא ראיתי
עד הנה מיום עמדי על דעתי ואשר
ראיתי ולמדתי בעלותי לשם בלתי
אפשרי לספר ולדבר אפי' פא"ם אך
בחדירתי לג"ע התחתון וראיתי כמה
נשמות החיים והמתים הידועים לי
ושאינם ידועים לי בלי שיעור ומספר
ברצוא ושוב לעלות מעולם לעולם דרך
העמוד

1) A copy of a letter that was written by the holy R. Israel Besht, may his memory abide in the world to come (*zichrono l'chaye...*), to the Holy Land.

On Rosh Hashanah in the year 5507 (c. Sept. 1746)⁵⁷, I made an oath⁵⁸ and elevated my soul as you know [I have been known to do]⁵⁹, and I saw wondrous things in a vision; [things] which I haven't seen since the day I attained maturity⁶⁰ and that which I saw and learned there in my ascent is impossible to recount or to relate even mouth to mouth in person. Upon my return to the lower Garden of Eden, I saw many souls, both of the living and the dead, some of whom were known to me and some of whom I did not know. Without limit or number, they were running back and forth⁶¹ and ascending from world to world by way of the “pillar,”⁶²

⁵⁷ Only two of these ascents have been recorded, both of which took place on New Year's Day, the traditional judgement day of the year when the fate of the people is determined on high. The Talmud (*Berakhot* 18b) refers to a saint (“*hasid*”) who remained in the cemetery on the eve of *Rosh Hashanah* and there learned the decrees in heaven to be issued during the coming year. No doubt this well-known passage was in the mind of the Ba'al Shem Tov.

⁵⁸ It is not clear what kind of oath the Besht made prior to his ascent, except that it is closely tied to the ascent. Perhaps it was a mental or verbal affirmation of his readiness. To engage in such an ascent would require complete detachment from one's physical body and material surroundings. To achieve that kind of detachment, it would seem logical that some kind of affirmation or “oath” would be required. Joseph Dan translates the phrase as, “I used divine names...” (*Teachings of Hasidism*, p. 96.)

⁵⁹ The intended recipient of this letter was Rabbi Gershon of Kutow, a famous talmudic scholar who was at first bitterly opposed to his sister's marriage to the Ba'al Shem Tov but later became a disciple. R. Gershon knew of that the Ba'al Shem Tov frequently engaged in ascents of the soul.

⁶⁰ An expression that means when he became aware of things, mystically.

⁶¹ “*ratzo v'shov*.” A phrase taken from Ezekiel 1:14 and used frequently in mystical literature, implying a reaching toward, and retreat from, the intensity of a mystical vision or a spiritual radiance.

⁶² The pillar or column linking the lower Paradise to other levels of reality is well known from earlier kabbalistic sources and recurs in various traditions. (Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, p. 321, n. 133.)

הידוע לידועי חן בשמחה רבה
וגדולה אשר ילאה הפה לספר וכבד
האזן הגשמי משמוע וגם רשעים רבים
חזרו בתשובה ונמחל להם עונותיהם
באשר שהי' עת רצון גדול שגם בעיני
יפלא מאד שכמה וכמה נתקבלו
בתשובה שגם אתה ידעת אותם והיה
ביניהם ג"כ שמחה רבה מאד ועלו
ג"כ בעליות הנ"ל וכולם כאחד בקשו
ממני והפצרו בי עד בוש באמרם לרום
מעלת כבוד תורתך חננך ד' בבינה
יתירה להשיג ולדעת מענינים האלה
עמנו תעלה להיות לנו לעזר ולסעד
ומחמת השמחה הגדולה שראיתי
ביניהם אמרתי לעלות עמם ובקשתי
ממורי ורבי שלי שילך עמי כי סכנה
גדולה לילך ולעלות לעולמות העליונים
כי מיום היותי על עמדי לא עליתי
בעליות גדולות כמהו ועליתי מדריגה
אחר מדריגה עד שנכנסתי להיכל משיח
ששם לומד משיח תורה עם כל התנאים
הצדיקים וגם עם שבעה רועים ושם
ראיתי שמחה גדולה עד מאד ואיני
יודע לשמחה מה זו עושה והייתי סובר
שהשמחה הזו ח"ו על פטירתי מהעוה"ז
והודיעו לי אח"כ שאיני נפטר

which is known to those who "know" grace⁶³, in a great and magnificent rapture that would exhaust the mouth to recount and burden the physical ear to hear. Many sinners repented and their sins were pardoned because it was a propitious time. Also, in my own eyes it was very miraculous that some of them were forgiven. Also, you know some of them.

Even they were amazed as they rose in the ascension mentioned above. Then all of them unanimously begged and pleaded with me until I was embarrassed, saying: "Your highness, the honor of your teachings (an honorific address), the Lord has graced you with exceptional understanding to perceive and discern these mysteries. Ascend and be for us a helpmate and support." On account of the great rapture that I saw amongst them, I agreed to ascend with them. Then I requested of my teacher and rabbi⁶⁴ that he go with me because it is very dangerous, ascending to the supernal worlds, since from the day I was able to stand [on my own two feet, spiritually] I had not ascended to such great heights. I ascended one step after another until I entered the chambers of the Messiah wherein the Messiah studies and teaches Torah with all the *Tannaim* and the *Tzaddikim* and also with the Seven Shepherds.⁶⁵ There I witnessed an intense rapture and, not knowing why there was such rejoicing, I had thought that this rejoicing was, G-d forbid, over my departure from this world. But they told me later that I was not about to die

According to a legend, the last subject discussed by the Besht was the pillar of the souls. (Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim: Early Masters*, p. 84.)

⁶³ A term for the mystics.

⁶⁴ The Besht's teacher was Ahiyah the Shilonite. See *Keter Shem Tov* 143. Ahiyah is mentioned in 1 Kings 11:29, 14:2, and is said to have been from the generation of the Exodus. He is also said to be the prophet Elijah, who reveals himself to those who are worthy. See *Bava Batra* 121b, Introduction to *Yad: Zohar* 1:4b, 3:309a. (see Kaplan, *Meditation and Kabbalah*, p. 339)

עדיין

כי הנאה להם למעלה כשאני מייחד
יחודים למטה ע"י תורתם הקדושה
אבל מהות השמחה איני יודע עד
היום הזה. ושאלתי את פי משיח
אימת אתי מר והשיב בואת תדע
בעת שיתפרסם למודך ויתגלה בעולם
ויפוצו מעיינותיך חוצה מה שלמדתי
אותך והשגת ויכלו גם המה לעשות
יחודים ועליות כמוך ואז יכלו כל
הקליפות ויהי' עת רצון וישועה
ותמהתי ע"ז והי' לי צער גדול
באריכות הזמן כל כך מתי זה אפשר
להיות אך ממה שלמדתי בהיותי שם
שלשה דברים סגולות ושלשה שמות
הקדושים והם בנקל ללמוד ולפרש
ונתקרה דעתי וחשבתי אפשר שע"ז
יוכלו גם אנשי גילי לבוא למדריגה
ובחינה כמותי דהיינו בהיותם יכולים
לעלות וילמדו וישיגו כמו אני ולא
נתנה רשות כל ימי חיי לגלות זאת
ובקשתי עבורך ללמד אותך ולא
הורשיתי כלל ומושבע ועומד אני על

as yet since it is pleasing to them on high when I perform unifications⁶⁶ down below through their Holy Torah. But the nature of their happiness I do not know to this day.

So I asked the Messiah himself, "When is Master coming?" He replied, "By this you shall know: in the time when your teachings become famous and revealed throughout the world and "your well gushes forth and overflows"⁶⁷ that which I taught you and you have grasped, so that others will be able to perform unifications and engage in ascents as you do.⁶⁸ Then all the *kelipot*⁶⁹ will perish and it will be a propitious time for salvation."

I was astonished on account of this and was greatly distressed by the length of time this would take. When would this be possible? But, nonetheless, I learned while there three special charms and three holy names, and they are easy to learn and explain. And so my mind was put at ease and I thought it was possible: that on account of this the people of my age (his contemporaries) would also be able to reach the stage and level that I have attained. That is to say, they too will be able to ascend and learn and achieve what I have achieved. But no permission was given to me to reveal this as long as I live. I even requested, for your sake, that I may be allowed to teach you, but I was given no permission whatsoever and I swore that I would abide by

⁶⁵ According to the Talmud, these are Adam, Seth, Methuselah, Abraham, Jacob, Moses and David. (see *Sukkah* 52b)

⁶⁶ A kabbalistic concept of effecting harmony in the totality of creation by "connecting" (unifying) things to their spiritual root.

⁶⁷ A paraphrase of Proverbs 5:16: "Let thy springs be dispersed abroad, and courses of water in the streets."

⁶⁸ One of the anticipated results of the spread of R. Israel's teachings, according to what he heard from the Messiah, was that all Jews would become able to "perform *yihudim* and ascensions" as he did. This inclusion of the ascent as a common ideal is highly significant: until then a privilege for a small elite, the Besht believed it could be diffused to and practiced by a larger public.

זה אך זאת אני מודיעך והשם יהי
 בעזרך לנכח ה' דרכך ואל יליוז
 בעת תפלתך ולימודך וכל דיבור
 ודיבור ומוצא שפתך תכוין ליחוד
 כי בכל אות ואות יש עולמות ונשמות
 ואלהות ועולים ומתקשרים ומתייחדים
 זה עם זה ואח"כ מתקשרים ומתייחדים
 האותיות ונעשה תיבה ומתייחדים יחד
 אמיתי באלהות ותכלול נשמתך עמהם
 בכל בחינה ובחינה מהנ"ל ומתייחדים
 כל העולמות כאחד ועולים ונעשה
 שמחה ותענוג גדול לאין שיעור
 בהבינך בשמחת חתן וכלה בקטנות
 וגשמיות וכ"ש במעלה העליונה כזאת
 ובודאי ה' יהי בעזריך ובכל אשר
 תפנה תצליח ותשכיל תן לחכם ויחכם
 עזר.

this. However, this I will make known to you. May God be of help to you and may your way ever be towards God.⁷⁰ When you pray and study let [my words] not forsake you.⁷¹ With every word and utterance that departs from your lips, have in mind to bring a unification [of G-d's name] for in every single letter there are worlds and souls and divinity. These letters rise and connect themselves and become unified, one with another, until [all] the letters connect and become unified and a word is made which joins itself completely with the Divine. Let your soul be included with them on every level as described above. In this way, all the worlds are united as one and ascend to cause an immeasurable happiness and joy. In your understanding [it is like] the happiness of the bridegroom and bride on a smaller scale in the physical world. So much the more (*kol sheken*) in the supernal realm such as this!

Without a doubt, G-d will be your help and wherever you turn you will succeed and become wise. "Give to the wise and he will become wiser."⁷²

Explication: The intensity of this experience must have been rare, even for the Besht, given that we only know of two such experiences. Since he mentions that he had not had such an experience since the day he became mystically aware of things, it is possible that it was a third and similar experience that marked the beginning of his mystical career. That would not be at odds with accounts of those, even in our own day, who say their lives were changed, albeit on a smaller scale, by ecstatic, traumatic, or even psychedelic

⁶⁹ "husks" or "shells", analogous to the crude husk that encompasses the edible fruit; a kabbalistic term for the realm or forces of evil and impurity.

⁷⁰ Cf. Judges 18:6; Proverbs 5:21.

⁷¹ A paraphrase of Proverbs 4:21.

experiences. As for the nature of his experience, we can only imagine its initial breadth and intensity, given that he was only able to describe what occurred when he “returned to the lower Garden of Eden.”

The advice given to R. Gershon by the Besht following his ascent is typical of the latter’s approach to the prayer. Although concentrating on the letters diverts one’s mind from the literal meaning of the prayer, the technique is intended to be pneumatic, freeing one from the concerns of discursive thought. The use of letters as an object of meditation is rooted in earlier kabbalistic conceptions which viewed the Hebrew letters as vessels that contained divine potency. As early as the thirteenth century, meditative kabbalistic systems regarded the letters as a primary means for attaining contact with the divine immanence.⁷³

When a person utters the Hebrew letters, words and prayers of the traditional liturgy, he participates in a process in which he is able to bring down the flow of divine grace into all of creation. The Besht writes that “in each letter there are worlds, souls and divinity,” an expression which seems to imply that each letter contains a microcosmic reflection of the macrocosm. That includes the cosmic process whereby human souls are united with God and through them all worlds are united with God. The Besht compares the joy inherent in such unification – if it can be compared at all – to the union of a bride and groom.

Considering the placement of this account as the very first *ma’amar*, one may wonder if it was intended to serve a function similar to the mystical accounts related at

⁷² Proverbs 9:9.

⁷³ See Idel, *The Mystical Experience of Abraham Abulafia* (SUNY, 1988). The *Zohar* also asserted that the divine emanation was contained in the letters of the Torah. In Safedian Kabbalah, this concept became the

the beginning of the book of Ezekiel, chapter six of Isaiah, or I Kings 22:19-22. Perhaps R. Aaron of Opatow felt this account would establish the credibility of the Besht as one who has merited a mystical, if not prophetic, vision of the supernal realms. The account might have been intended to legitimize R. Israel's mystical knowledge, just as certain literary paradigms may have been used in the prophetic literature for similar reasons.

It goes without saying that the ascent of the soul that the Besht describes in his letter was not physical. One can say that it took place in his mind, or his imagination. This, however, does not lessen the importance with which the Besht regards his experience. He writes as though he saw what he described with his physical eyes. He even bases his advice at the end of his account, and the authority with which he speaks, on this imagined experience. This provides us with an important key to understanding his worldview – a worldview which differs fundamentally from the scientific worldview that dominates our way of thinking.

We tend to require physical evidence and logical proof before we validate an experience or the conclusions derived from that experience. For the Besht, however, his own subjective experience seems to be just as “real,” if not moreso, than anything physical or rational. We might be inclined to ask: “where exactly did he go in his ascent?” “How did he know he was talking to the Messiah and not someone else?” “How do we know he wasn’t dreaming?” Would we accept and practice his advice based on such an unverifiable experience? Probably not, for if we subscribe to a scientific worldview, such questions would create too great a stumbling block for the concentration and perseverance needed in the application of his teachings. What we must then ask

basis for *devekut* through immersion in Torah study. Hasidism absorbed this idea primarily through the *Zohar* and Safedian texts.

ourselves is this: "can there be another standard, other than physical or rational proof, for believing the Besht?"

Several of the *ma'amarim* translated below respond in different ways to this fundamental, epistemological question.⁷⁴ Generally speaking, the standard for believing the truth of what cannot be proven by the senses is faith. It is not a blind faith, however, but one that is confirmed by the experience of joy, wisdom, healing or contentment.⁷⁵ This practical, rather than theoretical approach, can be compared to today's increasingly widespread practice of "wholistic" medicine. We may not yet know why acupuncture or meditation work in treating a variety of illnesses, but the documented evidence that they do work has become the justification for their use.

Given the practical, experiential orientation of the Besht, we find in Hasidism less concern with the complex Lurianic theories of the *sefirot* and their interactions of the cosmic realm and a greater interest in their psychological counterparts. Secondly, there is less concern with the eschatological messianism that dominated the Lurianic Kabbalah and a greater emphasis on personal redemption. Thirdly, there is less concern with the punctilious performance of *mitzvot* and a greater emphasis on *kavanah*, or the intention with which the *mitzvah* is performed. In all three cases, the focus is clearly on the subjective experience of the individual. This however, is not at the expense of the greater good of society – a criticism that is frequently leveled against mystical teachings. The *ma'amarim* of the Besht clearly reflect concern for social welfare⁷⁶, and Hasidism later became one of the most socially cohesive movements in Jewish history.

⁷⁴ See Mm. 3, 14, 25, 63, 66, 138, and 206.

⁷⁵ See Mm. 1, 14, 25 and 63 respectively.

Ma'amar 2

The following *mikveh* meditation is based on kabbalistic exercises that reached their height of complexity in the *yihudim* ("unifications") of Isaac Luria (1534-1572). As it is a relatively difficult passage for the uninitiated, only the first half is translated here. Meditations such as these were intended to effect *tikkun*, cosmic restoration, by repairing the broken vessels that shattered during the process of Creation. The primary medium for *tikkun* was manipulation of the ten *sefirot*, which can be reconfigured into five groupings, adding even greater complexity to the entire scheme. These five groupings or configurations of divine light, called *partzufim* ("faces"), are given human attributes and functions determined by the qualities of the *sefirot* of which they are comprised. The *sefirah Keter* was reconstituted as the *partzuf* of *Arieh Anpin* (lit., "the Long-Faced One," i.e., "the Indulgent One" or "Forebearing One") or *Attika Kadisha* ("the Holy Ancient One"). The *sefirot Hokhmah* and *Binah* were reformed as the *partzufim* of *Abba* ("Father") and *Imma* ("Mother") respectively. The fourth *partzuf* is that of *Ze'ir Anpin* ("the Short-Faced One" or "the Impatient One"), which contains the six lower *sefirot*, from *Din* through *Yesod*. The final *partzuf* is *Nukva de-Ze'ir*, the "female of Ze'ir," representing the *sefirah Malkhut*, or *Shekhinah*. This *partzuf* contains two aspects: *Rachel* and *Leah*.⁷⁷

The focus of this *mikveh* meditation is on an intricate array of divine "names." These "names" correspond to the *partzufim* and their multiple subconfigurations, whose unification is effected through formalized and sustained concentration. Like the

⁷⁶ See Mm. 1, 5, 6, 8, 9, 15, 18, 19, 69, 116, and 58.

⁷⁷ Fine, "The Contemplative Practice of *Yihudim*," p. 68.

partzufim, the “names” of God constitute a vast and complex “map” of the divine structure.

In a way that is highly reminiscent of the seemingly arbitrary combining of Hebrew letters characteristic of Abulafian mysticism, Luria’s divine “names” are, to a considerable degree, beyond rational understanding. For the kabbalist, however, to exercise one’s concentration successfully upon the “names” of God is to theurgically restructure the cosmic forces operating in the divine realms.

ב

כונת המקוה מהבשמים ולהיה
קודם יכון סוד הנז' בגמרא ו' מעלות
 במקואות ועפ"י סוד כזה יהו
 חסד יו"ה נצח ה'ר"י גבורה ה"י'ר'
 הוד ר"ה' ת"ת ר"ה"י יסוד והמים
 שבמקוה הם ט' יודין דע"ב ס"ג מ"ה
 ב"ן גי' מ"י וכולם נמשכין משם ע"ב
 שהוא הראשון שהוא חסד גי' ע"ב
 והוא בחי' מים לכן הם מ' סאה נגד
 ד' יודין דע"ב גם מקוה גי' קנ"א

The *mikveh* meditation of the Besht, may his memory abide in the world to come.

One should first meditate on the esoteric teaching mentioned in the *Gemorrah*⁷⁸ that there are six steps of *mikva'ot* (pl.) and according to that teaching, [God’s name, spelled as]:

yud-hey-vav corresponds to *hesed*

hey-yud-vav corresponds to *hod*

yud-vav-hey corresponds to *netzah*

vav-yud-hey corresponds to *tiferet*

hey-vav-yud corresponds to *gevurah*

vav-hey-yud corresponds to *yesod*

and the water that is in the *mikveh* corresponds to the nine *yuds* [that appear] in the 72, 63, 45 and 52-letter [expansions of the Tetragrammaton.]⁷⁹ The *gematria* begins with the *yud* and they all [the rest of the letters] follow from there. The 72 [letter name] is the first and that [corresponds] to *hesed* which, in *gematria*, is 72 and this is the level of water, and that is why there are 40 measures corresponding to the 4 *yuds* in [the Name of] 72.⁸⁰ Also, [the word] *mikveh* in *gematria* equals 151,

⁷⁸ *Mikvaot, perek 1a, masechet 1b*

⁷⁹ There are four ways to spell *yud-hey-vav-hey* in Hebrew, each having a different numerical value.

⁸⁰ In this first plenary spelling, there are four *yuds*.

כמנין אהי' במילוי ההין שהוא בסוד
הבינה שהוא בית קיבול לקס"א קמ"ג
חגה בנין והגוף הוא ע"י שם קנ"א
כמ"ש האריז"ל והגוף הוא כלי חרס
ואין לו טהרה במקוה כי כלי חרס
שבירתו זהו טהרתו וענין שקודם
כניסתו למקוה צריך לשבור לבו
בקרבנו ומקבל עליו עול מלכות שמים
לעזוב משעיו ומעתה מוכן לעבוד
באהבת חסד ויראת גבורה בכדי שיוכל
השי"ת להתפאר ת"ת בו כמ"ש ישראל
אשר בך אתפאר וימסור א"ע על
קדושתו ועי"ז ינצח נצח החטא
בבטחונו בהש"י שישוב את נדחו וצריך
להודות הוד לו שניצול ממצולת ים
ואז הוא נכלל בכלל צדיק יסוד עולם
ואז עי"ז יתגדל ויוכר כבוד מלכותו
מלכות ש"ש לעולם ועד ועוד יכוין
בהיותו בהמקוה כי שם אדני מלכות
הוא סוד הדבור ושם הוי' הוא

which is the name "*Ehyeh*" in its plenary spelling,⁸¹
which is really the [*sefirah*] *binah*, which is the
complement of 161 and 143.⁸² This [corresponds to] the
composition of the body, which is on account of the
name KNA, as was said by [R. Isaac Luria] "the Lion,"
may his memory be a blessing, that the body is [like] a
clay pot, which cannot be made pure in a *mikveh*.⁸³ For
a clay pot, it's breaking is it's purification.⁸⁴ Thus,
before entering the *mikveh*, one must break his own
bodily heart [inclinations] and receive upon himself the
yoke of the heavenly kingdom, to renounce his sin and
from then on be ready to serve, in the love of grace
(*Hesed*) and the fear of judgment (*Gevurah*) so that God
should be glorified (*Tiferet*) in him, as it is said, "Israel,
in whom I will be glorified."⁸⁵ And he will surrender
himself for the sake of His holiness and, on account of
this, overcome (*Nezach*) sin by his trust in God; that he
give up his wandering and should give thanks (*Hod*) to
Him for saving him from the depths of the sea. Then he
will be included among the righteous foundation (*Yesod*)
of the world. Then, on account of this, he will be made
great and will recognize the glory of His kingdom
(*Malkhut*) for the sake of heaven, forever and ever.⁸⁶

Another [meditation]: One should meditate upon
entering the *mikveh* that the name *Adonai* is *Malkhut*.
This [according to the] esoteric [teachings of the
Kabbalah] is the word. The name *hey-vav-yud* is the

⁸¹ A plenary spelling of the name *Ehyeh* has a numerical value of 151.

⁸² 161, 143 and 151 are three numerical values of the plenary spellings of the name *Ehyeh*.

⁸³ Rashi's commentary to Leviticus 11:33 explains that an impure clay pot cannot be made pure in a *mikveh* but must be broken.

⁸⁴ Also, according to *Keilim*, *perek 2a*, *masechet 1a*, some utensils may be *kashered* by immersion, but a clay vessel cannot be made fit for use once it becomes unfit for use. It is rendered "fit" only by being broken.

⁸⁵ Isaiah 49:3.

⁸⁶ Notice the descent through the seven lower *sefirot*, corresponding to the six steps one descends into the *mikveh*. The seventh *sefirah* may represent the floor of the *mikveh* or the state of mind one enters.

ז"א

סוד הקול ושם אהי' סוד המחשבה
ובמקוה הגג של המקוה נגד שם אהי'
הדר רוחות של המקוה נגד ד' אותיות
הוי' וקרקע המקוה נגד שם אדני
וג' שמות הם גי' יב"ק הוא סוד יחד
ברכה קדושה ויכוין שנכנס לבקש
מהשי"ת טהרה וקדושה למחשבתו
ולקולו ולדבורו ואז ע"י כוונת הג"ל
שבע יפול צדיק וקם אף אם ירד
שבע מעלות אחורנית ירפאהו השי"ת
ויכרות ברית חדש אשר לא תופר
ואז יאיר על גשמתו קומה הרוחניות
אותיות מקוה סאה גי' אד' ס"ה וא'
שבסאה הוא סוד חכמה שהוא י'
ראשונה דשם הוי' י' במילוי כזה
יוד מרומז הוא לששה קבין שבסאה
וי"ל לששה מעלות שבמקוה כנ"ל
ושורש מילוי דע"ב ס"ג מ"ה גי' ק"ב
ר"פ ק"ב גי' ברית לתקן הפגם של
הברית קדש וד' של מילוי יו"ד רומז
לד' לוגין כי יהו במילוי אלפין גי'
לוג ועי"ז יזכה לעבודת השי"ת ויאמר
פסוק זה עם הכונה מקוה ישראל ה'
מושיע בעת צרה ויכוין ר"ת מקוה
ישראל הוא מי ה' מושיע הוא ר"ת
ים שה"ס השכינה שממנה מתעדין
דינים שבהשם אלף ה"ה יו"ד ה"ה
כנ"ל שהוא גי' מקוה ושם נמתקים
בסוד הלידה ע"י המים שבמקוה דהיינו
ס' יודין דע"ב ס"ג מ"ה ב"ן
שעולים גי' צ' כמנין מים ועל ידי
ד' יודין דע"ב שהם מ' סאה כי גילוי
הגבורות ה"ס שם אגלא ר"ל שמתגלים
הה"ג שהם שורש כל הגבורות ומתגלים

העתקתי אות באות מדברי קדש של
הבעש"ט.

Zeir Anpin,⁸⁷ which is the **voice**. The name *aleph-hey-yud* is the **thought**. In the *mikveh*, the roof corresponds to the name *aleph-hey-yud* (the **thought**). The four walls of the *mikveh* correspond to the four letters *hey-vav-yud* (the **voice**). The floor of the *mikveh* corresponds to the name *Adonai* (the **word**). These three names have the same numerical value as *Jabok*⁸⁸ (*yud-bet-koof*), which symbolically represents *yihud* (unity), *b'racha* (blessing) and *kedusha* (holiness). This is the esoteric unification of the holy blessing: (????) One should make an effort upon entering [the *mikveh*] to request of God the purification and sanctification of his thoughts, his voice and his words. Then, on account of the meditation mentioned above, "The righteous man falls seven times and rises up again."⁸⁹ Even if he descends seven steps [to the] lowest [level], God shall heal him and make a new covenant with him which shall not be revoked. Then a welling up of spirituality will shine upon his soul.

The letters of the *mikveh*'s *seah* (a specific measure), in *gematria* is the name *Adonai*, which equals sixty five, and the *aleph* in the word *seah* is really *Hokhmah*, which corresponds to the first *yud* in the Tetragrammaton. The *yud* in this spelling is *yud-vav-dalet*. The *vav* alludes to the six *kavin* (another measurement, plural of *kav*) that make up a *seah*....

...I have written [this] letter for letter from the holy words of the Besht.

⁸⁷ Another name for the *sefirah*, *Tiferet*, which like a living organism, can grow and mature.

⁸⁸ The name of the river Jacob crossed over in Genesis 32:23 before wrestling with the man/angel.

⁸⁹ Proverbs 24:16

Explication: As mentioned above, this meditation is extremely complex and cryptic to anyone not well-versed in the Lurianic *Kabbalah*. I can only speculate as to why such a difficult teaching it is so prominently featured as the second *ma'amar*. I suspect the reason is two-fold. First, it may have been intended to lend credibility to the teachings of the Besht in the eyes of non-Hasidic kabbalists. Although Hasidim was described by Scholem as the fifth and latest historical stage of Jewish mysticism, a view almost universally accepted, non-Hasidic mystics and kabbalists were quite active before and during the time of the Besht. Some of the most ardent opponents of early Hasidism were Lurianic kabbalists. For them, this mikveh meditation was standard fare and may have been placed here to make them feel that the Besht was one of their own.

ג

מהבעש"ט ביאור הלואי אותי
 עזבו ותורתי שמרו פי' כי
 תכלית הידיעה שלא נדע אמנם יש
 ב' סוגים שלא נדע א' מיד שאינו נכנס
 לחקר ולידע מאחר דא"א לידע ב'
 שחוקר דורש עד שידע שא"א לידע
 וההפרש בין זה לזה מלה"ד שנים
 שרצים לידע את המלך וא' נכנס בכל
 חדרי המלך ונהנה מאוצרי היכלי
 המלך ואח"כ

3) From the Besht: an explanation of [the a verse in rabbinic literature,] "If only they abandoned Me but kept My laws."⁹⁰ The explanation [is as follows]: The highest level of knowledge is [knowing] that we cannot really know.⁹¹ There are two types of [this] "not knowing." The first is [exemplified by someone who] from the beginning chooses not to investigate and find out that it is ultimately impossible to know. The second [is one] who investigates and searches until he discovers that it is impossible to know. As an analogy,⁹² [imagine that there are] two people who want to know the king. One enters all the chambers of the king and enjoys the treasures of the palaces of the king, but after that he is

⁹⁰ from the *Yerushalmi*, *Hagigah* 1:7; *Petichta Eikah Rabbah*, 2. This passage is an emendation of a biblical verse (Jeremiah 16:11) which reads, "...you...have forsaken Me, and have not kept My laws." The rabbis have just explained how God may pardon the most abominable sins except for a contempt for the Torah. As a proof text, they amend the verse from Jeremiah to suggest that God wouldn't mind if He were forsaken, as long as His laws were kept.

⁹¹ A very Maimonidean concept.

⁹² *Mashal*: *lamah hadavar domeh?*

לא יוכל לידע המלך
 והשני אמר מאחר שא"א לידע המלך
 לא נכנס כלל לחדרי המלך ולא נדע
 מיד ובזה יובן ודאי בשני סוגים הנ"ל
 אותי עזבו מלידע שא"א מ"מ הלואי
 אותי עזבו מתוך החקירה והידיעה
 אחר שתורתי שמרו.

[still] not able to know the king. The second one immediately said that it is impossible to know the king, and so he does not enter any of the chambers of the king and [thus] from the start did not know [the king]. From this [analogy] one understands precisely the two types mentioned above. "They abandoned Me..." because it is impossible [to know Me.] Nonetheless [God says] "If only they abandoned Me..." [that is to say,] from the search for and knowledge of [God], after [which it is written] "...but My laws they kept."

Explication: The introduction to this *ma'amar*, "from the Besht," is commonly used to introduce other *ma'amarim* throughout the *Keter Shem Tov*. It is not clear why R. Aaron uses it when he does. It seems unlikely that it introduces a particular type of teaching. However, since the *ma'amarim* were derived from earlier sources, it is possible that the introductory phrases reflect the wording used in the original texts.

The Baal Shem Tov frequently uses analogies, as he does here, in which there is a king who represents God. In this case, he uses it as a means to describing two types of people: those who seek God by way of the Torah, and those who give up in their search altogether. He acknowledges that for both types God is unknowable, but the one who follows the path of Torah and *mitzvot* is like the one who enjoys the treasures of the king's palace.

It is important to note here that the Besht is advocating the performance of *mitzvot*. Although his teachings are mystical in nature, they are firmly rooted in normative Jewish practice and tradition. Here he praises those who keep God's laws and indirectly criticizes those abandon God and tradition. The connection between the analogy and the opening verse from *Hagigah* is tenuous. But as is typical in Hasidic

literature, the scriptural passage serves primarily as a jumping off point for somewhat tangentially related material.

ד

מהבעש"ט כל אחד צריך להתנהג
עפ"י מדריגתו משא"כ התופס
מדריגה של חבירו זה וזה לא נתקיימה
בידו ח"ש הרבה עשו כרשב"י ולא
עלתה בידם ר"ל שלא היו בבחינה זו
רק שעשו כרשב"י שראו אותו בבחי'
זו ולכך לא עלתה בידם.

4) From the Besht: Every person should conduct himself according to his own level of understanding. What is said about this? One who tries to conduct himself according to the level of someone else will not succeed [on either his own level or that of the other person.] This is [the meaning of] what is said, "Many imitated R. Shimeon bar Yohai but they did not succeed."⁹³ That is to say that they were not on his level. They tried to imitate R. Shimeon bar Yohai, whom they saw as being on that level, and therefore they did not succeed.

Explication: The first sentence of this *ma'amar* may have been a common truism, on which the Besht elaborates. It is made clearer with the verse from *Berakhot*. As was the case with R. Shimeon bar Yohai, accomplished people frequently have admirers who try to imitate them. Because someone else's intellectual and spiritual qualities cannot be imitated, one must examine his or her own level then act appropriately. This requires one to be humble, honest in one's introspection, and accepting of one's own intellectual and spiritual capacities.

ה

מבעש"ט פי' הש"ס יצא ב"ק ואמר
כל העולם ניזון

5) From the Besht: The "*shas*"⁹⁴ explains: "A *Bat Kol*⁹⁵ went out and said, 'All the world is sustained for

⁹³ *Berachot* 35b. R. Shimeon bar Yohai, who according to tradition wrote the *Zohar*, is revered as the greatest mystic of all time and is even granted superhuman status.

⁹⁴ A commonly used abbreviation for the *sissha sederim*, or "six orders of the Mishnah," referring to the Talmud. Historically, the Catholic Church had banned the Talmud on different occasions, and so it was common to refer to it euphemistically. The abbreviation "*shas*" was easy and inconspicuous enough to serve that purpose.

בשביל חנינא
בני כר כי שביל הוא צנור שפתח
צנור ושביל השפע חיש בשביל חנינא
בני.

the sake (*bi-sh'vil*) of Hanina is my son..."⁹⁶ A *sh'vil* (which also means "path") is like a pipe that opens a heavenly pipe or a path of cosmic abundance. This is what is meant by the saying, "for the sake of my son Hanina" (understood as also meaning "by the path of Hanina [through which abundance flowed downward from heaven].")⁹⁷

Explication: In the Talmudic passage referred to here, a number of rabbis debate the meaning of a verse from Isaiah, "Listen to Me, O fierce-hearted ones, who are far from righteousness" (46:12). One rabbi explains the verse by saying that the entire world is sustained by God's righteousness, while the righteous are sustained by their own merits. Another rabbi explains that the entire world is sustained by their merit, but they themselves are not sustained by it. The example is given of the righteous R. Hanina ben Dosa who is said to have lived on a meager basket of dates from one week to the next. Although the world was sustained by his righteousness, it was not enough to provide for his own sustenance.

The Besht uses this passage but builds on its original meaning to advance his own teachings. By punning on the word *bi-sh'vil*, he attempts to explain how the world was sustained. He introduces the concept of a cosmic pipe through which Hanina, the prototype of the Hasidic *tzaddik*, could draw down divine favor for the benefit of humanity. While the idea of the pipe does not occur frequently in Hasidic literature, the theurgical power of the *tzaddik*, exemplified by the pious Hanina, became a central aspect of Hasidism as it developed in the generations following the Besht.

⁹⁵ The *Bat Kol* is a heavenly voice that is cited throughout the Talmud.

⁹⁶ *Berachot* 17b, Hanina ben Dosa (first century C.E.) was famous for his extreme piety. There are many stories in rabbinic literature that portray his pious nature and tell of miracles testifying to his saintliness.

והדבר אשר יקשה מכם תקריבון
 אלי פי' הבעש"ט בשם הרמב"ן
 שצוה לבנו אם יסתפק לך באיזה דבר
 איך לעשותו כשיש בו דרכים לצדד
 לכאן ולכאן או שיש לך ספק אם הוא
 מצוה אם לאו ואם יש לעשותו או
 למנוע ממנו והדבר שיש לאדם הנאה
 ממנו יכול למצוא ראי' להתיר האסור
 ע"כ או תראה קודם כל לסלק מעסק
 דבר זה הנאת עצמך או כבודך ואח"כ
 תראה לצדד לכאן ולכאן או השי"ת
 יודיעך האמת ותלך לבטח וז"ש והדבר
 אשר יקשה מכם שאינכם יודעים איך
 לעשותו או למנוע הספק נולד מכם
 שיש בו הנאתכם ע"כ תסלקו מדבר זה
 הנאתכם ותקרבון אלי והכוונה שיהי'
 לשם שמים בלי שום פנייה והנאה או
 ושמעתיו אתן לו הבנה איך יתנהג
 וק"ל.

6) "That which is too hard for you, you shall bring to me [and I will hear it]."⁹⁸ The Besht explained, in the name of Ramban, that he commanded his son⁹⁹: if you are in doubt about something in particular, what will you do in a situation where you have to choose the right thing to do? Or what if you have a doubt as to whether doing something is a *mitzvah* or not? Or if one should do [something] or abstain from doing it when it is something from which a person can derive pleasure? One might [naturally] try to find proof to permit the forbidden. That being the case, you should see to it that, first you abstain from engaging in any activity that affords personal gratification, and then you should analyze the pros and cons [to determine what is right.] Only then will God make known to you the truth and you can proceed with confidence. This is what is meant when it is said, "*v'hadavar asher yikashai mi-chem* – that which is too hard for you...": that is, when you don't know whether to do something or to abstain from doing it, doubt is born *mi-chem* – **on account of your self interest** – when it affords gratification. That being the case, you should separate yourself from that which will provide pleasure or advantage "...and bring it to Me..." The intent is that one should act solely for the sake of heaven without being motivated by personal gain. When one does this, "... then I will hear it," i.e., I will give him the hearing (understanding) of how to behave. This is easy to understand (i.e., enough said).

⁹⁷ Hanina serves here as an archetype of the *tzaddik* whose prayers can effect miracles.

⁹⁸ Deut. 1:17; Here Moses is delegating judicial responsibility to the head of tribes.

⁹⁹ The source in Ramban from which Besht is quoting is not cited. Also, it is not clear who commanded whose son.

Explication: This is a very ingenious commentary on the rather unusual wording in verse 1:17 of Deuteronomy. The verse might typically be read as, “that which is too hard for you....” The Besht reads it as, “that which is too hard on account of your self-interest.” That is to say, when one’s self-interest complicates a situation, he should distance himself from it and “act solely for the sake of heaven without being motivated by personal gain.” This teaching can be applied on the most mundane level, as in everyday business transactions, or in having to go out of one’s way to return a lost item to its owner, or in performing a *mitzvah* even when it is inconvenient. In any of these situations, one might be tempted to find reasons to act in accord with his self-interest. This is what the Besht tries to overcome in this teaching. However, it should not be misinterpreted as a call for asceticism. Other *ma’amarim* more clearly state his position in that regard.¹⁰⁰

ז

מבעש"ט פי' ע"פ נשיו הטו לבבו
 שאין לך שום תיבה בתורה
 שאינו טובל ב' משמעות שהוא בחי'
 דבר ונוק' כר' א"כ אין לך שום דבר
 נברא בעולם שלא יהי' כלול מהכל
 והבחירה נתונה לו להטות לאיזה
 בחינה שירצה לכך נשיו הטו לבבו.

7) From the Besht: An explanation of the verse:

“[For it came to pass, when Solomon was old,] that his wives turned away his heart after other gods.”¹⁰¹ There is no word in the Torah that does not possess two meanings, like [the dual] aspects of male and female. Therefore, there is nothing in the created world that does not contain within itself both aspects. Freewill is given to a person, to turn toward whichever aspect he wants. Therefore, “his wives turned away his heart.”

Explication: This *ma’amar* is difficult because the teaching it conveys seems so tangential to scriptural verse by which it is framed. First we must ask what question the Besht is attempting to answer. It may be the question, “how could Solomon, as wise as he was, be so foolish as to allow his heart to be turned after other gods?” This may be an

¹⁰⁰ See M. 219.

attempt to rationalize his behavior, or at least explain how it occurred. Since everything has both good and bad potentialities, it is easy to make a mistake by simply turning the wrong way.

The idea that everything contains the potential for both good and bad is a remarkably sophisticated one. Rather than creating a dichotomy in which something is attributed with either good or bad qualities, the Besht recognizes the inherent potential for both at any time. This allows for even the worst sinner for make *teshuvah* (repentance) and receive forgiveness.¹⁰² It also reminds us not to blindly trust even a *tzaddik*, for he too is human and capable of falling into sin.¹⁰³

In the kabbalistic view, on which this teaching is based, both good and evil are paired in seven categories corresponding to the seven lower Divine attributes, or *sefirot*: 1) love of something, marked by attraction, and also manifesting itself in terms of kindness; 2) fear of something, marked by repulsion, and also manifesting itself in terms of severity and strictness; 3) recognition of an inherent quality of status, such as beauty or some achievement, manifesting itself in praise or admiration; 4) the trait to endure, prevail or conquer; 5) the trait to acknowledge, or of a restraining splendor; 6) the trait of bonding, of establishing a relationship; and 7) the trait of governance in the sense of applying the other traits. (The seventh differs from the others in that it is more passive, dependent on the others, rather than active.

These seven traits are analogous to the *sefirot* because they are a reflection, worldly counterparts, as it were, of the Divine attributes, and rooted therein. For ultimately all things are rooted in the Divine. The *sefirot*, however, are altogether holy

¹⁰¹ I Kings 11:4

¹⁰² See M. I.

and good. The human traits, on the other hand, are like man himself: they can be holy and good or manifest themselves as the very opposite. Thus there is a “good love” and a “good fear,” relating to that which ought to be loved or feared, and there is the fall to “bad love” (illicit love, or love of sins) and to “bad fear” (inappropriate fear, or hatred). There is the “good admiration” of the holy and sublime, and there is the fall to “bad admiration” as in pride or obsession; and so forth. It is possible to transform any sin or evil impulse by tracing it back to its divine source. This process, referred to as “subduing, separating and sweetening.” is described in *ma'amarim* 28, 39, 69 and 160.

ח

מבעש"ט ז"ל יפקד ה' איש אשר
יוציאם ואשר יביאם. כי ראש
הדור יוכל להעלות כל הדיבורים
והסיפורים של אנשי דורו לקשר
הגשמי ברחמי כמו הנהו תרי בדחי
בר.

8) From the Besht, may his memory be a blessing: “Let the Lord, [the God of the spirits of all flesh,] appoint a man [over the congregation, who shall go out before them, and who shall come in before them, and] who shall lead them out and who shall bring them in....”¹⁰⁴ [This means] that the leader of a generation is able to elevate all the words and stories of the people of his generation; to attach the physical with the spiritual just as “one who is entertained by two jesters....”¹⁰⁵

Explication: The Besht may be attempting to explain the hidden meaning that is implied by the verse's apparent redundancy: “go out, come in...lead out...bring in” The *tzaddik* moves in and out among his people, making him intimately familiar with their words and stories. At the same time, he is uniquely able to “lead them out” to a higher plane of existence and bring them back.

¹⁰³ See M. 133.

¹⁰⁴ Numbers 27:16-17

¹⁰⁵ This refers to a story, related in *Ta'anit* 22a.

The story in *Ta'anit* 22a is about a person who took a trip with Elijah. Elijah pointed out two men whom he said were destined for *Gan Eden*. When the person asked by what merit they deserved such a reward, Elijah explained that they were jesters who made people laugh about simple, mundane matters. In doing so, they brought about peace between men by lifting their spirits, or as the Besht describes, by attaching the physical with the spiritual. It seems odd to compare the leader of a generation to a jester, but the Besht seems to admire the ability to make people happy and bring about peace and unity, regardless of who possesses that ability.

ב

מִי שֶׁהוּא חָכָם לֵב יָקָח מִצְוֹת פִּירֵשׁ
 לְקֶשֶׁר מַעֲשֵׂה הַמִּצְוָה שְׁעוֹשֶׂה
 שֶׁנֶּקֶד מִצְוָה תִּתָּאֵה לִיַּחְדָּא אֵל מִצְוָה
 עֲלִיוֹנָה שֶׁהִיא הַמַּחֲשָׁבָה וְכוּנָה שֶׁל
 הַמִּצְוָה וְהוּא שְׁאוּמְרִים עַל מִצְוָה א'
 אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בַּמִּצְוֹתָיו.

(וּמַהֲבַעֲשִׁי"ט) עִ"פ וִיחִי עֶרֶב
 וִיחִי בֹקֶר יוֹם אֶחָד וְכו' הָעֲנִין
 כִּי אֶהְרֵן עִ"י שֶׁקֶר שֶׁאֵמַר כְּמָה חֲבִירִךְ
 מִתְחַרֵּט וְשֶׁלַּחֲנִי אֲצִלְךָ כִּי כִמְשׁ
 בַּמִּדְרָשׁ עִ"ז עָשָׂה שְׁלוֹם כִּי רֹפֵא
 מוֹמָחָה עִ"י סָמִים מִמִּיתִים רִשְׁאִי
 לְהִשְׁתַּמֵּשׁ בָּהֶם כְּדִי לְהַחְיֹת הַנַּפְשׁוֹת
 וְהוּא בִשְׁמֵי דְחֻלִּין הָאֵמֶנֶם

9) "He whose heart is wise accepts *mitzvot*."¹⁰⁶

This means to connect the performance of the *mitzvah* which one does, which is called the lower half of the *mitzvah*, with the upper half of the *mitzvah*, which is the thought and intention of the *mitzvah*, thus unifying [both halves]. This is [what is meant when it is] said over [the performance of] one *mitzvah*, "...who sanctifies us with His *mitzvot*." (This wording suggests that there are two components to each *mitzvah*.)

Also from the Besht with regard to [the verse]:
 "And there was evening and there was morning – one day...."¹⁰⁷ The matter [at hand is that] Aaron spoke falsely when he said "some of your friends regret [what they've done] and have sent me to you...."¹⁰⁸ As it is said in the Midrash, through this he made peace, just as a physician heals by the use of deadly poisons. He [the physician] is permitted to use them [when they are able] to revive people." This is what [meant when it] is said in the "*shas*," (the Talmud) in [tractate] *Hullin*, "Indeed,

¹⁰⁶ Proverbs 10:8.

¹⁰⁷ Genesis 1:5.

אלם צדק
תדברון יכול יגיס דעתו שהוא בניחותא
ע"ש.

in silence speak righteousness'.... Perhaps then he is to become arrogant?"¹⁰⁹ That [is to say] he should make peace in silence.

Explication: The use of the word "acquire" in the opening verse is puzzling. It could be a quote from scripture or it could be translated from the Yiddish in which the sayings were originally transmitted. It is not clear how the idea presented follows from the opening verse, but it is well-supported by the blessing over the performance of one *mitzvah* which speaks of *mitzvot* in the plural form.

The second teaching does not clearly follow its opening verse from Genesis. Since these *ma'amarim* are derived from earlier sources, it is possible that this section was taken out of a larger context which dealt with Aaron or the importance of making peace. The verse from *Pirke Avot* refers to an incident in which Hillel said, "Be of the disciples of Aaron, loving peace and pursuing peace..." Rashi's commentary explains how Aaron made peace. He was known to have told the parties on both sides of a conflict "your friends regret [what they've done] and have sent me to you." Thus, when the two parties met again, they embraced and forgave each other. In this way did Aaron speak falsely for the sake of peace.

The closing passage is taken from *Hullin* 89a, in which R. Isaac comments on Psalms 58:2, "Indeed in silence speak righteousness; judge uprightly the sons of men (*ha-umnam eilem tzedek t'dabeirun; meisharim tishp'tu b'nei adam*)." R. Isaac uses the double-meaning of the word for "indeed" (*ha-umnam*) as the basis for asking, "What should be a man's pursuit (*ha-umnam*) in this world?" He suggests that the verse

¹⁰⁸ *Pirke Avot* 1:12.

¹⁰⁹ This is an abbreviated reference to a passage in *Hullin* 89a.

answers by saying he should be silent (*eilem*). If one should think he is entitled to be silent with regard to words of Torah, the verse tells us that is not so by saying “speak righteousness (*tzedek t'dabeirun*).” If one should think he might become pompous or arrogant by taking such a position, R. Isaac uses the double-meaning of the word for “uprightly” (*meisharim*) as implying “evenness,” being the opposite of pompousness or arrogance. The entire passage seems to extol the virtue of being humble

הַקֵּב"ה נֶקֱא אִישׁ שֶׁהוּא אִישׁ מִלְחָמָה
וְיִשְׂרָאֵל נֶקֱא אִשָּׁה וְז"ש הָאִשָּׁה
נִקְנִית לְבַעֲלָהּ שִׁיהִי נֶקֱא אִשָּׁה כְּבִיכּוֹל
בְּג' דְּרָכִים א' בְּכֶסֶף בְּחֵי חֶסֶד יְמֵי
הַחֶסֶד שֶׁהִקְבִּיָּה מְסִיעָהּ בְּחֶסֶד וּגְדוּלָּה
בְּתַחֲלָה וְזוֹ כּוֹסֵף חֹשֶׁק וּמִתְלַבֵּב
בְּתוֹרָתוֹ וְעִבּוּדוֹ ית' זֶה נֶקֱא גְדוּלָּה
רִאשׁוֹן וְאַח"כּ נִסְתַּלַּק זֶה וְנֶקֱא יְמֵי
הַקְטָנוֹת וְגַם שְׂאִינוֹ כּוֹסֵף חֹשֶׁק מ"מ
עַל צַד הַהִכְרָח צָרִיךְ לְדַבֵּק עֲצָמוֹ בְּשֹׁטֶר
שֶׁהֵם אוֹתִיּוֹת הַכְּתוּבִים בְּסֵפֶר שֵׁנִי
שֹׁטֶר בֵּין בְּאוֹתִיּוֹת הַתּוֹרָה בְּלִמּוּדוֹ וּבֵין
בְּתַפְלָה כְּאִשֶּׁר קִבְּלָתִּי

10) The Holy One, blessed be He, is called a man as in “a man of war”¹¹⁰ and Israel is called a woman. This is [what is] said [in the *Mishnah*¹¹¹ about] a woman who is betrothed by her husband: that they [Israel] shall be called “His wife,” as if that were possible,¹¹² in [one of] three ways; first, by money. [This corresponds to] the quality of *chesed*, loving-kindness, [or rather,] “the days of kindness” in which God helps [us], in His great loving-kindness, in the beginning [of our spiritual journey]. Then there is yearning¹¹³ and passion and enthusiasm for His Torah and His service; and this is called “the first greatness.” But afterwards, this [*chesed*] is withdrawn, and this [period] is called “the days of constrictedness,” when there is no yearning, nor passion. Nonetheless, by necessity one must attach himself [to God] with a contract, which is the letters that are written in the book (the Torah) which is called “the contract.”¹¹⁴ [This can be done by reading] either the letters in the Torah during one’s study, or in prayer. As I heard from

¹¹⁰ This name for God appears in Exodus 15:3 and is recited in the morning service just prior to the *Barechu*.

¹¹¹ *Kiddushin* 1a: “A woman is acquired in [one of] three ways...through money, contract, and sexual intercourse.”

¹¹² *Ki-v'yachol*, a technical phrase frequently used when speaking about God in such anthropomorphic terms.

¹¹³ *Koosaf*, “yearning,” a word that plays on the double meaning of the root which also means “money.”

ממורי הבעש"ט

וליה זה שיש סגולה כר' עד שיתחזק
אח"כ להתענג בו ע"י שבאו המוחין
בתורה ותמלה שנק' בביאה שהוא זוג
ב' הגיל.

my Master, the Besht, may his memory be a blessing,
"In this [can be found] the remedy...." Thus one returns
[from his lower state] to delight in God, on account of
the fact that his mind is united [to God] by Torah and
prayer, which is called "sexual relations," which is the
second unification [or, more precisely, the third means
of betrothal] previously mentioned.

Explication: In this *ma'amar*, the Besht describes the process of *ratzo v'shov* – the ebb and flow of spiritual life which occurs on in both the macrocosm and the microcosm. The biblical idea of Israel being betrothed to God was originally understood as occurring on the macrocosmic level, whereby a relationship was established between God and Israel as a people. Just as the Besht brought down the Lurianic conception of the *sefirot* to the individual or psychological level, he does the same with the biblical concept of divine betrothal. Here it is the individual worshipper who is goes through a sequence of stages in which betrothal in initiated and consummated. In the beginning, passion and enthusiasm comes easily. When it begins to wane, it must be sustained by Torah study and prayer. It is interesting to note that the waning of one's spiritual energy is not due to any weakness on the part of the individual. Rather, it is the result of a divine process – the withdrawal of *chesed*. It is also interesting to note that when it returns on account of one's engagement in Torah study and prayer, the outcome is compared to sexual relations. Thus for the Besht, the "delight in God" to which one returns must have had a powerful, experiential component. More than finding satisfaction in achieving some theoretical union of the *sefirot* in the heavens, as in the theosophic-theurgic Kabbalah of

¹¹⁴ This "contract" refers to a *ketubah*, the second way in which a betrothal can be effected.

Luria, the teachings of the Besht clearly reflect the experiential elements of the ecstatic Kabbalah as transmitted by Cordovero.¹¹⁵

יא

בספר עץ החיים כשעלה ברצונו
הפשוט לברוא העולם כו' וראי'
מוכרחת לזה מאדם המחדש בתורה
שחידש יש מאין ובתחלה לא חידש
ועכשיו השכל מוליד ונתחדש דבר
יש מאין ומהבעש"ט ז"ל שיש בשכל
אדם עשר ספירות כי אבא ואמא הם
המולידים דבר שנתחדש בתורה נק'
או"א ובתחלה נק' חסד כשנתחדש
הדבר שמתפשט לאין תכלית שהוא
בחי' חסד כנודע ואח"כ צריך בחי'
גבורה סוד הצמצום שיוכל לתפוס
לאמרו בפני אחרים והכל ע"י קו
האמצעי כו' ואח"כ צריך האמנה כמ"ש
בש"ס דמכות בא חבקוק והעמידן על
אחת וצדיק באמונתו יחי' ובחינת
האמנה הם תרי

11) In *Sefer Eitz Ha-Hayyim* (The Tree of Life)¹¹⁶ [it is written]: "when it rose in His simple will to create the world...."¹¹⁷ The convincing evidence for this is someone who derives a new idea from the Torah, in that he produces something from nothing. In the beginning the new idea did not exist, whereas now the intellect gives birth to it and something is originated from nothing. From the Besht, may his memory be a blessing, there is, in the mind of man, ten *sefirot*. Because it is the "father and mother"¹¹⁸ who give birth, that which originates [a new insight] in the Torah is called "father and mother." In the beginning it was called *hesed* (love, compassion) when it creates something that emanates without end or limit. This is the level of *hesed* as is known. After that, *gevurah* is necessary, which implies restriction, so that one should be able to grasp [a new idea] to explain it to others. All this occurs through the middle *sefirah* [*tiferet*].¹¹⁹ Afterwards, faith is necessary, as it is said in the "shas" (The Talmud) in tractate *Makot*¹²⁰, "Habakuk came and established them [all the *mitzvot*] upon one [ethical requirement]. As it is said [in Habakuk 2:4], 'A *tzaddik* will live because of his faith.'"¹²¹ The aspect of faith is [represented by] "two

¹¹⁵ See Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, pp. xi-xvii for a brief discussion of the two trends.

¹¹⁶ An early seventeenth-century work by Chayim Vital, based on Isaac Luria's teachings.

¹¹⁷ "Simple will" means the very first stage of emanation, or God's original impulse to create the universe.

¹¹⁸ Referring to *hokhmah* and *binah*, whose functioning give rise to the seven lower *sefirot* that are manifest in Creation.

¹¹⁹ *Tiferet* represents the perfect balance between *hokhmah* and *binah*, i.e., expansive and restrictive love.

¹²⁰ *Makot* 24a.

¹²¹ In *Makot* 224a, there is a discussion about the number of *mitzvot* one needs to perform to merit the World to Come. Of the 613 *mitzvot*, King David is quoted as saying they can all be fulfilled by the

סמכי קשום נצח והד
ואח"כ התענוג שיש לו במה שחידש
נק' יסוד שהוא אבר התענוג ונתגלה
ע"י הדיבור שהוא מ' ובאמת כי קודם
ה"י הקב"ה בורא עולמות עליונות ע"י
עסק בתורה ברזין סתימין ואחר כך
בעסקו בתורה בנגלה נבראו עולמות
אלו הנגלין.

pillars of truth, *netzach* and *hod*.”¹²² After that the delight he derives from his innovation is called *yesod*, which is a organ of pleasure (*phallus*), and this is revealed through speech, which is [the *sefirah*] of *malkhut*.¹²³ Truthfully, God first creates the supernal worlds through His involvement with the mysteries of the Torah. After that, through his involvement with the revealed aspects of Torah, the revealed worlds are created.

Explication: In this *ma'amar*, the Besht shows how the theoretical mechanics of the *sefirot* in the process of creation correspond to the inner processes of the human mind and their manifestation as speech. Given the complexity of the topic and the brevity with which it is described here, it is outlined in a rather abbreviated manner. Nonetheless, one can see the downward progression through the *sefirot* and the corresponding functions in human thought and speech. The Besht then closes with another paradigm for creation in which God creates the universe through the hidden and revealed aspects of the Torah. It is uncertain why this section was added; it may even have been said by someone other than the Besht.

יב
כ"י ביה ה' צור עולמים עה"ז נברא
בה"א שנאמר אלה תולדות
השמים והארץ בהבראם

12) “...for with [the letters] *yud* [and] *hey*, God designed the worlds.”¹²⁴ This world was created with the letter *hey*, as it is said, “These are the generations of heaven and earth in their creation (*b'hi'varam*).”¹²⁵ The

observance of eleven ethical requirements. Isaiah reduces the number to six and Micah to three. Isaiah returns and reduces them to two, then “Habakuk came and established them upon one ethical requirement.”

¹²² See the beginning of *Tikkunei Zohar*, *Petach Eliyahu*.

¹²³ The *sefirah* of *malkhut* is commonly associated with the mouth and speech.

¹²⁴ Isaiah 26:4. The above is a kabbalistic translation of the verse, more typically rendered as follows: “Trust in the Lord for ever and ever, for in *Yah* the Lord you have an everlasting Rock.

¹²⁵ *Minahot* 29b; *Yerushalmi*, *Hagigah* 2a; *Bereshit Rabbah* 2:9. *B'hi'varam* can also be read as *b'hey baram*, meaning “with a *hey* they were created.”

ועה"ב נברא

ביחד מפני שהצדיקים שבו מועטין
הענין שמעתי ממורי הבעש"ט
שהראו לו כשהולכיהו תחת עץ הדעת
טוב ורע היו עמו אנשים הרבה
מישראל ואח"כ שהעבירו אותו תחת
עץ החיים היו מועטין ואח"כ שהכניסו
אותו בג"ע הפנימי נתמעט עוד עד
שנשארו מעט מזער.

world-to-come was created with a *yud* (the smallest letter of the *aleph-bet*) because the righteous who dwell there are few. The idea that I heard from my Master, the Besht, is that when [his guides] took him under "the tree of knowledge, [both] good and bad," they showed him that there were many men of Israel (Jews) there. Afterwards, when they brought him under the tree of life, there were [only] a few. After that, when they brought him into the innermost [part of the] Garden of Eden, they were reduced even moreso, until hardly any were left.

Explication: The basic message of this *ma'amar* is that there are a few righteous people who merit the world-to-come; and idea that is not particularly unique to, or characteristic, of Hasidism. What is unique, however, is the account of Rabbi Israel's unique privilege or ability that allows him access to such places as the Garden of the Eden. Also, the midrashic word plays he uses to support his ideas may have been common in kabbalistic and Hasidic literature, but his command of them is impressive.

יג

ורוח אלהים מרחפת היינו רוחו של
אדם שירחף על פני המים היא
התורה או ויאמר ה' יהי אור ור"ל
שיאיר ה' עיניו ע"י אור התורה.

13) "And the spirit of God hovered [over the surface of the water]."¹²⁶ What this really means is that the spirit of a person, being of the same essence, should hover over the surface of the water, which really means the Torah. As a consequence, "And God said, 'Let there be light,'"¹²⁷ or in other words, God shall enlighten him – by the light of the Torah.

Explication: The basic message of this *ma'amar* is that one should study Torah. The way this message is conveyed is by comparing two verses from Genesis to the process and

¹²⁶ Genesis 1:2.

outcome of Torah study. We have seen how the Besht takes abstract concepts and processes from kabbalistic, rabbinic and scriptural texts and brings them down to the human and psychological level. In *ma'amar* 11, he does this with the kabbalistic account of creation; here he does something similar with the biblical account of creation.

This *ma'amar* exemplifies two other aspects that we typically find in the Besht's teachings. One is a reverence for the Torah as God's word. The juxtaposition of verses 2 and 3 in the first chapter of Genesis is not coincidental. The natural or divine process by which one is enlightened through studying Torah appears to be patterned after the very order of these verses. Whereas the microcosm mirrors the macrocosm, both reflect and are reflected by the text of the Torah.

The other aspect typical of the Besht's teachings is in the statement that the spirit of a person and the spirit of God are of the same essence. The profoundly mystical implications of this statement are not explored in any depth here. Similar bold statements can be found in other *ma'amarim*, such as 198 in which the Shekhinah speaks through the mouth of the worshipper. However, the Besht does not seem to care about articulating the theological, mystical or psychological dynamics of this essential union with the divine. It is his successor, R. Dov Baer of Mezeritch, who explored and articulated those dynamics, and in doing so earned himself the reputation of being a mystic of the most type.

וַיְהִי
כַחצוֹת הַלַּיְלָה שֶׁהַסֶּפֶק הוּא
כַחצוֹת לִכְאֵן וּלְכֹאֵן אִין אִין ה'
יֵצֵא בְּתוֹךְ

14) "[And Moses said, 'Thus saith the Lord,] 'At about midnight...' Doubt is like the phrase "at about midnight" – it's neither here nor there. But then [the verse continues], "...I will go out into the midst of

¹²⁷ Genesis 1:3.

מצרים במיצר שלו להאיר
עיניו.

Egypt [and all the first-born in the land of Egypt shall die...],¹²⁸ that is [I, the Lord, will enter] his doubtful mind – *b'mitzar shelo* – to enlighten him.

Explication: The Besht quotes only a small portion of the scriptural passage to support the belief that God can enlighten a mind embroiled by doubt. He begins by citing the unusual wording *c'hazot*, which means “at about midnight.” Why does God use such an ambiguous phrase, rather than more precisely saying “at midnight?” The Besht compares this ambiguity to doubt. It immediately follows that God will enter into the midst of Egypt. The Besht associates the word *mitzrayim* (Egypt) with *mei-tzarim* (from narrowness), a wordplay that appears frequently in Hasidic literature. Using this association, the Besht psychologizes the scriptural passage, again showing how the Torah can be read like a manual of psychological and spiritual dynamics.

טו

מהבעש"ט ג' חיות הן חן מקום
על יושביו וכר' ביאור ש"ס
דחולין קיפל כל א"י תחתיו הארץ
אשר אתה שוכב עליה לך אתננה פי'
שלא יצטרך לנסוע ממקום למקום
לברר ניצוצין שלו כי יבררם במקומו
ונח מצא חן בו.

15) From the Besht: There are three “favors” (i.e., things in which people find favor despite their apparent negative qualities): The favor of a place in the eyes of its inhabitants, [the favor of a woman in the eyes of her husband, and the favor of a purchase in the eyes of a purchaser.]¹²⁹ The Talmud explains¹³⁰ that God folded all of *Eretz Yisrael* under him (Jacob) [before He said.] “the land on which you lie I will give to you.”¹³¹ The explanation [of this verse is as follows]: He (Jacob) did not need to travel from place to place to elevate his divine sparks, because he had already elevated them

¹²⁸ Exodus 11:4-5.

¹²⁹ *Sotah* 47a

¹³⁰ In *Hullin* 91:2

¹³¹ Genesis 28:13; The Midrash presupposes the question: Given the wording of God's promise, of what value would be the few inches of ground underneath his body? Thus, the Midrash suggests that the entire Land of Israel was folded up underneath Jacob at the time of God's statement.

where he was. "And Noah found grace [in the eyes of the Lord.]"¹³²

Explication: Hasidism transformed the Lurianic idea of *tikkun* by emphasizing the notion of particular sparks that belong to each individual person. The tools that come into a person's hand, the food one eats, the places one travels are all assigned by the grace of heaven, as each contains some special spark that the individual soul alone can and must redeem. Here we see Hasidism straddling the late-medieval and modern periods by reading a medieval mythic motif so as to give expression to the strikingly modern idea of the unique religious task of each individual.

מז

מבעש"ט ז"ל כי מבשרי אחזה
כמו בזוג גשמי אינו מוליד
כ"א המשמש באבר חי וחישוק ושמחה
כך בזוג הרוחני הוא הדבור בתורה
ותפלה כשהוא באבר חי בשמחה ותענוג
אז הוא מוליד כר.

16) From the Besht, may his memory be a blessing, explained [the meaning of this verse]: "...by my flesh I will see [God]."¹³³ This is like physical intercourse, which does not lead to conception unless one has an erect penis, passion and excitement. So it is in spiritual union, which is speech in the Torah and prayer when it is [spoken] with a "live organ" and enjoyment and pleasure. Only then is it productive.

Explication: This *ma'amar* is suprising in its frankness. Nonetheless, the message it conveys is clear: one needs to be passionate in religious life if it is to be productive. The "live organ," or "flesh" as it is referred to in the scriptural verse, serves as a metaphor for one's passion.

¹³² Genesis 6:8. It is not certain why this verse is added onto the end of this saying. According to the editor's footnotes, this verse and the opening verse from *Sotah* were not part of this saying as found in other anthologies.

¹³³ Job 19:26

משנה כל העושה מצוה א' מטיבין
 לו דעיקר הכונה שצריך המכוין
 להמשיך הרוחניות ממדריגות עליונות
 אל האותיות כדי שיוכלו האותיות
 להעלות עד המדריגה עליונה לעשות
 שאלתו עוד ראוי לכוין בדבריו ובשמות
 וכנפין לעצם הספירות ואל הרוחניות
 הפנימי הנעשה לבוש אל עצמות
 המתפשט מאור א"ס המיוחד בתכלית
 היחוד אם כן צריך האדם להתבונן
 בעוסקו בתורה ותפלה שאותיות התר
 ותפלה הם כלים כמו הגוף וצריך
 להמשיך בתוכה הרוחני ובתוכו אור
 שהוא אחדות האמיתי כמו הנשמה לגוף
 ופשיטא במעשה המצות שהוא גשמי
 וכלי שצריך להמשיך בו הרוחניות
 ואחדות א"ס ח"ש כל העושה מצוה
 אחת דיקא מטיבין לו משא"כ ל"ט
 מלאכות שהם כנגד הקליפות לברר
 משם ניצוץ הקדושה והקליפות הם
 חסר אחת כי מעולם הפירוד המה והבן.

אמנם יש עוד כלל א' גדול שצריך
 לדבק עצמו דהיינו בפנימי
 התורה המצוה לקשר מחשבתו ונשמתו
 אל שורש התורה והמצוה אשר הוא
 עושה דאם לא כן עושה ח"ו קצוץ
 ופירוד

17) Mishnah: "One who performs one *mitzvah* receives benefits."¹³⁴ The essential meaning is that the spiritual seeker should draw down the *ruhaniyut* (spiritual energy) from the higher levels into the letters [of his prayer] so that the letters will be able to ascend to the highest level to fulfill his request. Also he should meditate, in his [recitation of] words, divine names and attributes, on the essence of the *sefirot* and on the inner spiritual energy [of the words, names and attributes.] They serve as a garment for the spiritual essence that emanates from the light of *Ein Sof* which is united [with them] in a perfect union. Since this is the case, a person should contemplate during his study of Torah and prayer that the letters of Torah and prayer are vessels, like the body. One should enter and dwell in the spiritual energy and the light of *Ein Sof*, which is the true unity, as the soul [dwells] in the body. How much the moreso when it comes to the performance of *mitzvot*, which are physical acts and vessels, and which one should infuse with spiritual energy and the unity of *Ein Sof*. This is what [is meant by what] is said: "One who does one *mitzvah*" necessarily "restores it." On the other hand, there are thirty-nine categories of work corresponding to the external shells from which the holy spark must be extracted. The external shells lack oneness because they are from the world of separation. Understand?

Truthfully, there is another great principle: that one needs to cleave himself, that is to say, to the inner aspects of the Torah and the *mitzvah* [he performs]. He must connect his mind and his soul to the root of the Torah and the *mitzvah* which he performs. If he does not do this, he chops, heaven forbid, and separates the

¹³⁴ *Kiddushin* 39b.

בנטיעות וכאשר שמעתי ממורי
הריב"ש וכן בחס"ל כי הנשמה היא
מעצם הבינה והתורה הוא מה שישמע
מהבינה ולמטה בת"ת כו' וכאשר
מקשר ומייחד נשמתו במקורה במקום
התורה ישיג משם דברים סתומים
ונעלמים.

plantings.¹³⁵ When (interruption for clarification) I heard this from my teacher, the Besht, and also in *Hesed l'Avraham*,¹³⁶ that the soul is from the essence of [the *sefirah*] *binah* and the Torah is that which receives the *shefa* from *binah*. Below in *tiferet*, etc. When one binds and unites his soul with the root of the Torah he will comprehend from there hidden and concealed matters [because the Torah is receiving its *shefa* directly from *binah*.]

Explication: This *ma'amar* combines a number of kabbalistic ideas. The Besht expands on his teaching that, in prayer, the Hebrew letters can serve as vessels, just as the body serves as a vessel of the soul or spirit. The same applies to a *mitzvah*, which can be infused with *ruchaniyut*, or spirituality. This *ruchaniyut* can be activated and caused to return to its divine source through the intention (*kavannah*) of the person fulfilling the *mitzvah*. When the *mitzvah* is performed in a state of *devekut*, there is a union of the person with the *ruchaniyut* of the *mitzvah*, which unites with the *ruchaniyut* of God.

With this process of unification, the Besht reinterprets the opening talmudic passage: rather than, or in addition to, benefiting oneself by performing a *mitzvah*, one benefits the *mitzvah*. This mystical understanding of the commandments places great emphasis on the quality of one's experience. This means that the importance of fulfilling a *mitzvah* lies primarily in the present, as an immediate opportunity for attaining *devekut*. This view is opposed to the one which emphasizes the accumulation of merit for future reward in the world to come.

¹³⁵ This is a reference to the Talmudic story in which the four rabbis enter the mystical Pardes. One of them, Acher, "cut the plantings," i.e., became a heretic.

¹³⁶ by Abraham Azulai, *Hesed l'Avraham* is essentially an abstract of Moses Cordovero's teachings, written about 1640. Scholem believes the text was printed no earlier than 1685. ("Devekut, or Communion with God," p. 223)

In the second section, the Besht explains how the Torah is connected to the divine source of *shefa*, or beneficence. By connecting oneself to Torah, one becomes connected to its divine source.

יח

מהבעש"ט שצריך להתפלל על
שונאיו שהם רוחו של צדיק
בגלגול כו' וע"י התפלה נמתק בשרשו
ומוציא מהם רוחו הנשאר בהם כלה
מאליו.

18) From the Besht: One should pray for his enemies, for [each one bears] the spirit of a reincarnated *tzaddik*, etc. And on account of the prayer, the spirit of the *tzaddik* is "sweetened" in its root and is then released from them [the sinners]. That which remains in them [their sin] will be destroyed by itself.

Explication: This is a typically pietistic teaching: that one should pray for one's enemies. It also draws on the belief in reincarnation, which became widespread in Hasidism. For a discussion on the concept of "sweetening," see *ma'amar* 28.

יט

ב"ש לשם יחוד קב"ה ושכינתו
הכוונה להביא הת"ת למל' שיתסאר
הקב"ה עם המ' דהיינו המדריג'
תחתונה עולם הדבור שזאת המדריג'
מחי' את כל העולמות כמ"ש בדבר
ה' שמים נעשו ונאמר ואתה מחי' את
כולם והדיבור של הקב"ה הוא תמיד
מחיה את כל העולמות וכשארם

19) What was said with regard to the union of the Holy One, blessed be He, with His *Shekhinah*: The meditation of bringing [the *sefirah*] *tiferet* into *malkhut* so that the Holy One, blessed be He, will be glorified with *malkhut*. That is, the lower level [of the supernal realms] is the World of speech. It is that level which enlivens the physical universe, as it is written, "by the word of God, heaven was made."¹³⁷

It is also said, "[You alone are the Lord. You made the heavens, the highest heavens, with all their host, the earth and everything upon it, the seas and everything in them.] You keep them all alive, [and the host of heaven prostrate themselves before You.]"¹³⁸ The word of God continually enlivens all the worlds and when a man

¹³⁷ Psalms 33:6.

¹³⁸ Nehemiah 9:6.

עושה

מצוה הקב"ה מתפאר במלכות דהיינו בדיבור שלו שהוא בתוך העולמות ואז מביא האדם המלכות אל הקב"ה דהיינו שהקב"ה מתפאר עם עולם הדיבור והו' יחוד קב"ה ושכינתו שיתפאר הקב"ה במלכות שהוא בתוך העולמות ויתגלה מלכותו דהיינו שיכירו הכל שהוא מלך בעולמות והו' תענוג גדול להקב"ה ומדת המלכות היא מצדינו ובידינו דהיינו שאנו מכירים גדולתו ומלכותו ואז הוא נשלם במדת מלכותו כי אין מלך בלא עם שמחמת העם נתגלה המלכות ויש להקב"ה תענוג גדול מזה.

performs a *mitzvah*, God is glorified in *malkhut*, which is His word that is within the worlds. Then, one brings *malkhut* to God. That is to say, the Holy One is glorified with the World of speech, and this is the unification of God and His *Shekhinah*. When the Holy One is glorified in *malkhut*, which is [manifested] in the physical universe, then His kingdom will be revealed. That is to say, that everyone will know that He is king of all the worlds and this pleases God greatly. This attribute of *malkhut* is immanent and within our grasp. That is to say, when we recognize His greatness and His kingship, then He is joined with the attribute of His *malkhut*, for "there is no king without a people"¹³⁹ because it is through the people that *malkhut* is revealed, and God derives great pleasure from this.

Explication: The union of which the Besht speaks is conceptualized in a Lurianic framework as a sexual union on the sefirotic level. The feminine element of the union is the *sefirah* of *malkhut*, which is also associated with speech and the *Shekhinah*. When a person performs a *mitzvah*, he brings about a union between God and his *Shekhinah*. In this way, it is through our efforts that God's Kingdom will be revealed. What is particularly striking about this *ma'amar* is that the almost messianic vision, in which "everyone will know that he is King," is described by the Besht as being imminent and within in our grasp.

ב

מהבעש"ט ומרעה הקריב כי בצר
הרחבת לי

20) From the Besht: "As Pharoah drew near, [the Israelites caught sight of the Egyptians advancing upon them.]"¹⁴⁰ Because "When I was in distress (*tzar*) You

¹³⁹ From a commentary on the *Zohar*, *Emek haMelech*; also *Sefer HaChayyim*.

¹⁴⁰ Exodus 14:10.

פי' ע"י שיש מצירין
מתקרב יותר להש"י וזהו הרחבת לי
שידע שזה חסר בשכינה ומתפלל בעד
השכינה אליו ית' ונעש' יחוד קבה"ו
כי צדיקא אינון שלוחי דמטרוניתא.

set me free.”¹⁴¹ An explanation: Whenever there are troubling circumstances or adversaries, one is drawn closer to God. This is [what is meant by] “You set me free.” When one knows that this [closeness] is what is lacking in the *Shekhinah*, and one prays to Him, may He be blessed, on behalf of the *Shekhinah*, this brings about the union between, the Holy One, blessed be He, and His *Shekhinah*, because “the righteous ones are the agents for the lady [i.e., the *Shekhinah*].”¹⁴²

Explication: As is typical in Hasidic literature, a verse from Torah and from the *ketuvim* are juxtaposed. The commentary that then follows usually explains the relationship between them. The relationship here is the idea that when one is in distress, God will set him or her free. The Besht takes this idea a step further and has us consider the distress of the *Shekhinah*, which awaits the end of her exile. By our prayers on her behalf, we serve as agents or assistants in bringing about a union between God and his *Shekhinah*.

כה

מהבעש"ט כאשר ידע האדם נגעי
לבבו שהוא חולי הנפש בסוד
הקטנות אחר שיש לו דעת זה או
ממתיק ע"י הדעת זה חזק רפואתו
משא"כ כשהוא בסוד ההסתר כמ"ש
ע"פ ואנכי הסתר אסתיר שאינו יודע
שהוא חולה ברוחני או אין לו רפואה
למכתו האנושה.

25) From the Besht: When a man recognizes the “plagues” of his heart [i.e., inner turmoil] which is really a sickness of the soul, which on a deeper level is on account of constrictedness, he will “sweeten” it on account of this knowledge, and thus [achieve his own] healing. In contrast, when [this constrictedness] is hidden from him, as indicated by the verse: “I will surely hide [My face],”¹⁴³ and he does not know that he is sick in his spirit, then there is no healing from his deadly [spiritual] illness.

¹⁴¹ Psalms 4:2.

¹⁴² The end of this sentence is in Aramaic, which would suggest that it is a quote. However, the source is not cited.

Exptolication: This *ma'amar* seems to be psychologically insightful. We know today he that many psychological illnesses cannot be overcome as long as one remains in a state of denial. Instead, one must recognize his or her illness before being capable of healing. Here the Besht speaks of the recognition of a "sickness of the soul" and the spiritual healing that comes in the wake of that recognition.

כח

נודע מ"ש בס' עץ החיים ענין מצות
המילה וחשמל ונ"ל להלביש
הדברים שזה שייך בין בתור' בין
בתפלה בין בעסק המצות וז"ס חשמל
שקבלתי ממורי הבעש"ט סוד הכנעה
והבדל' והמתק' שצריך בכל עסק תורה
ותפלה וז"ש ח"ש מ"ל שצריך לחשות
עד שמל וכורת הקליפה אז ימלל
וידבר למתק הדינין בשרשן שהוא סוד
התפלה שביאר מורי בשם רבו ולכך
נק' מחצדי חקלא ולכך צריך להפריד
ממחשבתו מחשבות זרות ועי"ז גורם
להבדיל ולפרש מהשכינ' הקליפות

28) It is known from what is written in *Sefer Etz ha-Hayyim*,¹⁴⁴ an association is made between the *mitzvah* of circumcision and the *chashmal* (divine energy). What is mentioned above can be generally applied to similar matters in Torah, prayer and the fulfillment of *mitzvot*. This is the esoteric meaning of *chashmal* that I received from my teacher, the Besht. [It refers to] the mystery of subduing and separating [the external shells from their spiritual essence] and sweetening [judgements] that is necessary in all aspects of Torah study and prayer. He said [*chashmal* should be understood as] *CHASH* and *MAL*, for one needs to be silent (*laCHASHot*) until he has circumcised (*MAL*) or cut off the external shell. Then he shall speak (*yiMALeL*) or pronounce [words of prayer] to sweeten judgements at their root, which is the secret of prayer that my master explained in the name of his teacher.¹⁴⁵ Consequently, [those who pray in this manner] are called "pruners of the field."¹⁴⁶ So one should remove intrusive thoughts from his mind [during prayer] and thus separate or remove the external shells from the *Shekhinah*. Consequently, the word *mal* bears

¹⁴³ Deut. 31:18; God says that He will hide His face as a means of indicating that He will allow the Israelites to suffer the consequences of their actions without His intercession.

¹⁴⁴ *Sefer Etz ha-Hayyim* by Chaim Vital based on the teachings of his teacher, Isaac Luria.

¹⁴⁵ According to Hasidic tradition, the Besht's teacher was Ahijah the Shilonite, a biblical prophet who also taught King David.

ולכך תיבת מל סובל ב' פירוש
א' דיבור ב' כרית' והבדל' זה נמשך
מה ויש חיש מיל שצריך להכרית
הקליפות ואח"כ מל דיבור בעסק תורה
ותפלה שהוא הבדלה והמתק'.

two meanings: speech (*MLL*) and cutting off (*MAL*)
[Despite] the distinction, one follows the other. He said
“*chash* and *mal*” to imply that one should first cut off the
external shells and then speak words of Torah and
prayer. Thus we have separation and sweetening.

Explication: From the above example, it is clear that early Hasidism remained interested in several goals that had long characterized the Jewish approach to prayer. Despite the emphasis on *devekut*, some of its basic interests remained petitionary and kabbalistic. Needs were to be fulfilled, although they were conceived as the needs of the *Shekhinah*, who required liberation from the clutches of external forces. Prayer had as another of its principal goals the “sweetening of [divine] judgement” and the stimulation of sources of beneficence.

The concept of *hamtakah* “sweetening” is based on this contrariety. All things have a good side and a bad side, both of which are rooted in a Divine source.¹⁴⁷ “Sweetening” means tracing the bad to its source, which naturally transforms it into its positive manifestation. For example, mundane beauty is rooted in, and a pale reflection of, the source of all beauty on high, in Divinity. Why, then, would one pursue the mere reflection when he can have the all-inclusive source? The inappropriate love of, and attraction toward, something mundane, something that is transient and illusory, thus is to be traced to the ultimate source of love and attraction in holiness and transformed into a love and pursuit of the holy. The same applies to all other categories of thought and feeling. That is how alien thoughts are elevated and assimilated into their source,

¹⁴⁶ A term applied to kabbalists because they separate the *Shekhinah* or the *sefirah*, *malkhut*, from the external forces of evil. *Malkhut* is called the “apple field.”

¹⁴⁷ See M. 7.

elevating man as well in the process. There was a momentary descent to the depth of the alien thought, culminating in an ascent to a level transcending one's original status.

The Besht is cautious in presenting this principle, as there is a real danger that such a descent may be counter-productive and lead astray.¹⁴⁸ It requires *hachna'ah*, "subduing" the evil with total divestment of self or any personal attachment,¹⁴⁹ and *havdalah*, its complete separation from the *kelipot*, i.e. a separation from any link with the realm of evil. These initial steps are earmarked by a profound sense of dread, that the person is overcome by a gripping fear of God.¹⁵⁰

כט

מהבעש"ט אתה הוא ה' אלהינו
פי' כשסובר האדם שהוא נוכח
ה' תואר אתה או הוא רחוק מהשם
תואר הוא נסתר משאיכ' כשסובר
שהוא נסתר ורחוק מהשם תואר הוא
או הוא קרוב ונוכח ה' תואר ה'
אלינו.

29) From the Besht: "You are *Hu* [the One who is] the Lord our God."¹⁵¹ This means that when a person thinks he is standing before God and uses the term "You," he is [really] far from God.¹⁵² [That is why] the term *Hu*, [the One who is], which implies concealment, is what is said here. But when he thinks that He is concealed, and that he is far from God, the term *Hu* changes. Then he is close and standing before God [which is] the meaning of the term [used here] for Hashem, "*Elokeinu*" [our God].

Explication: This *ma'amar* is difficult due to the fact that the word "he" does not explicitly indicate whether it refers to the worshipper or to God. In either case, the basic message involves God's concealment from one's ordinary consciousness. What the Besht may be referring to by the worshipper who thinks he can stand before God and

¹⁴⁸ See M. 90.

¹⁴⁹ See M. 6.

¹⁵⁰ See M. 160.

¹⁵¹ Verse from the song *Ein Keiloheinu*.

¹⁵² "You" is typically more impersonal than calling someone by name. It may also indicate someone who thinks he knows God.

address Him as "You" is one who thinks he can locate or identify God. God, however, is transcendent and cannot be located or identified. At the same time, God is immanent. Even when one thinks that God is far away, He is closer than he could imagine.

לם

מהבעש"ט ביאור ש"ס דברכות
א"ר זירא כל האומר שמע שמע
משתקין אותו א"ל ר' פפא לאביי
דלמא מעיקרא לא איכוין דעתי כר
א"ל חברותא כלפי שמיא מי איכא
אי לא כוון דעתי מעיקרא מחינן לי
במרופתא דנפחי עד דמכוין דעתי
והקש' דאכתי הקושיא במקומ' עומדת
מ"מ דילמא מעיקרא לא איכוין והשתא
בא לצאת י"ש ולכוין. ע"ק למה נקט
ר"ז דוקא האומר שמע שמע ב'
פעמים ולא פסוק אחר בק"ש או כיצא
וביאר מה הוא ענין קבלת עול מלכות
שמים והענין כי האדם מחויב להאמין
כי מכה"כ י"ת לית אתר אתר פנוי מיני'
וכל המחשבות של אדם יש בו
מציאותו י"ת וכל מחשב' היא קומ'
שלימ' וכאשר יעל' במחשבתו של
אדם בעת עסקו בתפיל' איזה מחשב'
רעה חר' היא באה אל האדם לתקנ'
ולהעלות' ואם אינו מאמין בזה אין
זה קבלת עול מלכות שמים שלימ'
כי מקצר ח"ו במציאותו י"ת

39) From the Besht: An explanation of the Talmudic passage in *Berakhot*¹⁵³: "R. Zera said, 'Whoever says 'Shema,' twice...should be silenced.' ...R. Papa said to Abaye, 'Perhaps initially he did not have proper concentration [and upon saying it again, he did have proper concentration.] Abaye] answered him, '[That itself would be disgraceful; after all,] may one [act] toward Heaven casually? If he did not concentrate at the outset, we strike him with a smith's hammer until he does concentrate!'"¹⁵⁴...

...thus he explained the meaning of "assuming the yoke of the kingdom of heaven." It means that a person is obligated to believe that "the entire creation is full of His Glory,"¹⁵⁵ may He be blessed, [and that] "there is no place where He is not found."¹⁵⁶ Thus all of a person's thoughts contain [an emanation] of His divinity, may He be blessed, for each thought is a complete entity.¹⁵⁷ Consequently, whenever during prayer a negative or extraneous thought arises, it comes to the person in order to be transformed and elevated. If a person does not believe this, he does not completely accept the yoke of the kingdom of heaven, for he limits, heaven forbid, His divinity.

¹⁵³ 33b.

¹⁵⁴ The Besht cites, in an abbreviated manner, an argument in the Talmud over whether or not one can recite a prayer twice, even if it is repeated so that the recitation be done with the proper concentration.

¹⁵⁵ Isaiah 6:3.

¹⁵⁶ *Tikkunei Zohar, Tikkun 57.*

¹⁵⁷ Since each thought contains an emanation of the divine, the entire sefirotic structure is present within it.

לפעמים יש מחשב' שצריך לדחות'
 ואם נפשך לומר במה אדע איזה
 מחשב' לדחות' ואיזה לקרב' ולהעלות'
 יתבונן האדם אם בשע' שבא המ"ז
 מיד עלה במחשבתו במה לתקנה
 ולהעלותה או ירא' לקרב' ולהעלות'
 ואם לא יעלה במחשבתו במה לתקנ'
 או מסתמא באה לבטל את האדם
 בתפלתו ולבלבל מחשבתו או רשות
 לדחות המחשב' ההיא כי הבא להורגך
 השכם כר'. ואם אמר במה תיבות
 בק"ש ובתפל' בלא כוונ' לא יאמרם
 פעם שנית רק יזרחר במחשב' ובכוונ'

Sometimes there are thoughts that should be rejected. If your soul says, "How will I know which thoughts to reject and which to draw in and to elevate?" [here is the criteria]: When an extraneous thought arises, a person should observe if a way to transform and elevate it immediately occurs to him. If so, he should draw in and elevate [the thought]. If a way to rectify [the thought] does not occur to him, then presumably the thought came to interrupt a person's prayer and to confuse his mind. If so, it is permitted to reject that thought, for "if one comes to slay you, rise up and slay him first."¹⁵⁸ If one said that some of the words in his recitation of the *Shema* and *tefillah* without *kavvanah* (proper concentration), they should not be said a second time but [one can repeat] in [silent] contemplation and with *kavannah* the words that were said without *kavvanah*, according to my teacher the Besht, may his memory live in the world to come.

Explication: This *ma'amar* focuses on the Hasidic approach to dealing with negative or extraneous thoughts, particularly when they arise during prayer. With regard to the opening talmudic debate, R. Israel tactfully finds a middle position: one can repeat a prayer if it was not first recited with the proper concentration, but the repetition must be done silently.

Although his position with regard to practice is moderate, the teachings on which his position is based are rather striking. The Besht boldly asserts that even negative thoughts are divine in nature and arise in order to be transformed and elevated. If a person does not believe this, he states, he limits God's divinity. As firm as his position

¹⁵⁸This saying appears in a number of other talmudic and midrashic sources, such as *Berakhot* 58a and *Sanhedrin* 72a

is, however, the Besht does allow for one to reject a negative thought if the way to transform it does not become immediately apparent.

מד

ענין דביקות בו יתברך הוא ע"י
אותיות התורה והתפלה שידבק
מחשבתו ופנימיותו לפנימיות רוחניות
שבתוך האותיות בסוד ישקני מנשיקות
פיהו דביקות רוחא ברוחא כמ"ש אם
תשכבון בין שפתים וכשמאריך בתיבה
הוא דביקות שאינו רוצה ליפרד
מאותו תיבה.

44) [What is said] regarding one who cleaves to Him, may He be blessed, through the letters of Torah and prayer, is that he attaches his thought and essence to the spiritual essence contained in the letters. The esoteric meaning [of the verse] "Oh, let him give me of the kisses of his mouth"¹⁵⁹ refers to an attachment of spirit to spirit, as it is said, "when you lie among the sheepfolds."¹⁶⁰ When you prolong the word, this is *devekut* from which one does not want to separate from [even] the letter of a word.

Explication: This *ma'amar* attempts to describe the experience of *devekut*, which is almost impossible to describe. Here we have a sense that it is a union in which the worshipper would want to linger.

נח

מבעש"ט ז"ל הנהו תרי בדחי
שהיו מייחדים כל עניני
הגשמי לקשרו ברוחני זולת מי שהי'
בעצבות לא הי' אפשר לייחדו כ"א
ע"י שהי' מבדחתו תחלה וכו'.

58) From the Besht: "These two jesters."¹⁶¹ They could unify mundane matters, connecting them to the spiritual, [for anyone] except one who was depressed. [For him] it was not possible to make this unity, unless they would first joke around with him, etc.

Explication: The role of the jester was discussed in the explication to *ma'amar* 8. What distinguishes this saying, however, is the Besht's response to depression. We know that he is adverse to ascetic practices,¹⁶² but here he seems to indicate that depression too

¹⁵⁹ Song of Songs 1:2.

¹⁶⁰ Psalms 68:14. Suggests a place of comfort and security.

¹⁶¹ *Ta'anit* 22a; see footnote to *ma'amar* 8.

¹⁶² See M. 219.

must be overcome if one is to advance spiritually. One must serve God in joy. This became one of the most popular teachings of the early Hasidic movement and may have contributed to its widespread appeal.

פג

מהבעש"ט משל למלך שהי' לו בן ורצה ללמדו כמה מיני חכמות שצריכין לו ושכר לו כמה חכמים שילמדו עמו והוא לא יצלה שיקבל שום חכמה עד שנתייאשו מללמדו ונשאר חכם אחד עמו ופעם א' ראה בן המלך איזה בתולה וחמד יפי' והי' החכם קובל למלך על בנו בענין זה והשיבו המלך א"כ מאחר שיש לו חמדה אפ"ה גם בגשמי מזה יבוא לכל החכמות וצוה להכניס הבתולה לחצר המלך וצוה עלי' המלך שאם יתבענה לא תשמע לו עד שיקבל חכמה אחת וכן עשתה ואח"ז אמרה שילמוד עוד חכמה עד שעייז קיבל כל החכמות וכשנעשה חכם אז מאס בבתולה הנ"ל כי ישא בת מלך כמותו והנמשל מובן.

א"כ ע"י מדה רעה שיש בתלמידי א"א אוכלין בעה"ז כו' מה שא"כ כשיש מדה זו בתלמידי בלעם הרשע הרשיעו בזה יותר עד שעייז יורשין גיהנם ויורדין לבאר שחת ושפיר אמר ומה בין תלמידי א"א כו'.

63) From the Besht: A parable of a king who had a son whom he wanted to teach various wisdoms necessary [for a prince]. He hired a number of scholars to study with him, but the prince did not succeed in acquiring any wisdom. Finally, [the scholars] despaired of ever teaching him, and [only] one scholar remained with him. One day the prince saw a young girl and desired her beauty. The scholar reported this incident to the king, to which the king replied: 'Since he has experienced desire, even if it was merely physical, through this he shall come to [acquire] all the wisdoms.' The king bid the girl to enter [his] court and instructed her that if she were summoned [by the prince], she should not submit to him until he has acquired one wisdom. The girl did this and on each subsequent occasion, she demanded that he acquire [yet] another wisdom, so that eventually he acquired them all. Once he became a scholar, he lost interest in the girl, for he was [fit] to marry a princess of his own rank. The meaning of the parable is clear.

This being the case, on account of the attribute of evil inherent in the disciples of Abraham, our father, "they enjoy this world..."¹⁶³ On the other hand, when this attribute is in the disciples of Balaam, the wicked one, they do so much evil on account of this that "they inherit *Gehinnom* and descend into the nethermost pit." [This

¹⁶³ This section refers to Pirke Avot 5:22 in which generous, humble and modest people (disciples of Abraham) are compared to people of a grudging nature, haughty spirit, and excessive desire (disciples of Balaam.)

was] eloquently spoken [by the Besht] as he [explained] the difference between the disciples of Abraham [and Balaam].

Explication: This significance of opening parable lies in its granting a warrant to exhaust the primordial desires without actually realizing them. It is not a dispensation for the release of bodily desires through their physical actualization, but through their transformation. This concept is of great importance for an understanding of the significance of confronting evil, as it points to the peculiar inner logic implicit in the idea of *avodah be-gashmiyut* in the ethical sphere.

In the second part, the Besht shows that even good and pious people (disciples of Abraham) have in them the attribute of evil. What distinguishes them from others, however, is their ability to transform it and “turn evil into good.”¹⁶⁴

סד

בשם רב סעדי' גאון שראוי לאדם
שילמוד מחשק דברים גשמיים
איך לחשוק עבודת השי' ואהבתו.

64) In the name of R. Saadia Gaon: It is befitting for a man to learn from his desire for physical things how to desire the service of God and His love.

Explication: It seems likely that the above quote was taken out of context. In the section on ideal human conduct in his *Book of Beliefs and Opinions*, Saadia states his position with regard to proper sexual relations and presents certain views for the sake of refuting them. It seems that the Besht is quoting a particular view that Saadia describes but later condemns. He, in fact, rejects the view that physical desire is commendable in that it

¹⁶⁴ See M. 69.

teaches man how to desire God and to crave submission to Him – precisely the view which the Besht advocates in the name of Saadia himself!¹⁶⁵

פה

מהבעש"ט המדבק א"ע בחלק
אחד מן האחדות דבוק בכולו
וה"ה ההיפך.

65) From the Besht: Whoever cleaves to a [small] part of [God's] Oneness, he grasps the entirety, and so too, the opposite is true [i.e., when he is not connected to even a small part, he remains separate from God's Oneness].¹⁶⁶

Explication: This saying hints at God's immanence. One can find God in even the smallest things. The inverse of this statement may be that if one does not find God in the smallest things, he will not find God at all. Another possible interpretation of the inverse may be that if one finds God everywhere, he will find God in the smallest things.

פו

בקשתי את שאהבה נפשי ולא
מצאתיו הנמשל הנ"ל שהמלך
הגדול ממ"ה הקב"ה מסתתר בכמה
לבושין ומחיצות והם מ"ז וביטול
תורה ותפלה כמ"ש בזהר כי הטוב
הגנז מסבב אותו החשך משל למלך
הנ"ל אמנם אנשי דעת היודעים דלית
אתר פנוי מיני' איכ' אין זה הסתתרות
אצלו כמ"ש

66) "I sought him whom my soul loves. [I sought] but found him not."¹⁶⁷ The meaning of the above verse is that the great King, the King who reigns over all kings, the Holy One blessed be He, disguises Himself behind several garments and partitions, such as extraneous thoughts and the interruption of Torah [study] and prayer. As it is written in the *Zohar*, "the good that is hidden, darkness surrounds it." is like the King mentioned above. Truly, for men of knowledge (kabbalists) who know that "no place is empty of Him,"¹⁶⁸ these are not true disguises, as it is said, "Our

¹⁶⁵ See *The Book of Beliefs and Opinions*, transl. by Samuel Rosenblatt, chap. 10, sections 4-7, pp. 367-377. See analysis and notes in Ada Rapoport-Albert, "God and the Zaddik" in *Essential Papers on Hasidism*, p. 303 and 324, n. 9.

¹⁶⁶ A similar concept may be found in *Sefer Charedim*, as cited in *Shemirat haLashon* of the Chofetz Chaim, *Chatimat HaSefer* 3.

¹⁶⁷ Song of Songs 3:1.

¹⁶⁸ *Tikkunei HaZohar*, Tikkun 57

אלופינו מסובלים כשירדע
שאלופו של עולם הוא בכ"מ אז סובל
הכל.

cattle are well cared for...."¹⁶⁹ When one knows that the master of the world is everywhere, then everything is taken care of.

Explication: This *ma'amar* describes God's concealment in terms of a King hidden behind garments and partitions. Those who know (i.e., the mystics or kabbalists), however, are not fooled by God's concealment. The Besht then cleverly reinterprets the verse from Psalms 144. The word for "our cattle" can be read as "our master," and the word for "taken care of" can be read as "surrounds." The knowledge of God's immanence is assuring to those who know.

כט

סור מרע ועשה טוב פירוש שיעשה
מרע טוב.

69) "[Turn] from evil and do good."¹⁷⁰ That is, you should turn evil into good.¹⁷¹

Explication: This *ma'amar* demonstrates how the Besht reinterpreted traditional sources to support his teachings – in this case, his approach to dealing with evil.

פא

מהבעש"ט פי' פ' וישלח יעקב
מלאכים הקשה בימות המשיח
שיבטלו הצרות וכל ענינים שצריך
להתפלל עליהם אי"כ התפלה שהוא
אבר השכינה וכי ח"ו אפשר לבטלה
גם הקשה ע"פ ביום ההוא יבוקש עון
ישראל

81) From the Besht: An explanation of [the opening verse of] *parashat va-yishlach*: "And Jacob sent messengers..."¹⁷² [The Besht raised the following] question: in the days of the Messiah when hardships no longer exist as well as all the matters for which we pray, the [need for] prayer will also be eliminated. But since prayer is a limb of the Shekhinah, is it possible, Heaven forbid, to cancel [the need for prayer]? Furthermore, [he raised the] question regarding the verse: "On that day, the transgression of Israel shall be sought for, and there

¹⁶⁹ Psalms 144:14

¹⁷⁰ Psalms 34:15

¹⁷¹ This particular play on words is frequently found in Hasidic literature. See, for example, *Chayei Moharan* 447

ואיננו ואת חטאת יהודה וק' למה יבוקש וכי צריך לעון בית ישראל ופי' כי יש ד' סוגי התפלה א' שצר לו על כבודו ית' שנתחלל בין א"ה ומתפלל, ב' על עונות כי הצרה הוא העון עצמו וגם העבירה חמורה ממיתה כי המיתה מכפרת וממרת עון משא"כ העון גורם במה מיתות וכריתות, ג' התפלה על הפרנסה, ד' על חיים והנה איברי השכינה מעוטף בד' עניני צער הנ"ל כדי שידע ויתפלל ויפרד הגשמיים ויעלה ניצוצי השכינה הפנימי למעלה משא"כ בדליכ" ד' סוגי הנ"ל אינו ידע על מה להתפלל וז"ש יבוקש עת ב"י כדי שיתפלל עליו ואיננו וגם חטאת עון בית ישראל ואיננו וגם חטאת וחסרון שאר סוגים הנ"ל ולא תמצאנה על מה להתפלל כ"א שיהי' התפלה דרך יחודים כי בל מעשים גשמיים שנעשה בעולם הכל נרמז בתורה והוא ג"כ

shall be none, and the sins of Judah [shall not be found.]”¹⁷³ Why search for [transgression]? Is there a specific need for Israel's sins?

He explained: There are four types of prayer. First, one grieves that God's honor has been desecrated by the nations of the world, and prays [that it be elevated and revealed.] Second, [one prays] because of sin, for one's [real] problem is the presence of sin, itself. Furthermore, sin is more stringent than death, for death atones for and cancels one's sin, whereas in contrast, sin brings with it the many [types of offenses punishable by] death and *kareit* (excommunication). Third, one prays for [one's] sustenance. Fourth, [one prays] for life [and health.]

The limbs of the *Shekhinah* are clothed with the four types of distress mentioned above. So one should become aware [of this] and pray, and [recognize as] separate the physical [aspects for what he is praying] in order to raise the hidden sparks of the *Shekhinah* upward. But if the four types [of distresses] mentioned above are to be absent [in the days of the Messiah], a person will not know what to pray for. Thus [scripture] says, “...the transgression of the House of Israel shall be sought for...” so that we may find some reason to pray, but it shall not be found. Also, “...the transgression of the House of Israel...” [itself] shall not be found. Furthermore, sin and the other deficiencies [for which we pray] mentioned above (reasons 1, 3 and 4) will be lacking. We will not find any reason to pray except [for the fact that] prayer will be a means for effecting *yihudim* (mystical acts of unifying the upper and lower worlds.) For everything that occurs in the physical world is hinted at in the Torah, and the same is true [for

¹⁷² Genesis 32:4

¹⁷³ Jeremiah 50:20

בעולם האצילות גם שכ'
בוהר שהוא דרך משל היינו ג"כ עדין
והעיקר האמנה שיאמין כי דרך דבורי
ותפלה הוא נעשה כך מיד בלי שום
ספק.

ובזה יובן וישלח יעקב השכינה כי
י' הוא גולמי שנתלבש בו' ימי
הבנין שהוא ע' כ"א כלול מ' ובאמת
ע"ס כ"א כלול מן י' הוא ק' והכל ע"י
הבינה שהוא ב' מלאכים כמ"ש
בכתבים מלאכים המוני מעלה כו'
אל עשו אחיו הוא עולם העשי' כו'.

everything that occurs] in the world of *Atzilut* (the World of Divine Emanation). It is also written in the *Zohar* that [what is said in the Torah] is to be understood metaphorically. By this [the *Zohar*] is saying that the most important thing is that one should have faith and believe without any doubt that through words and prayer, this becomes so [i.e., the unification of the upper and lower worlds is effected.]

By this we understand "*va-yislach Ya'akov*" [as saying that] Jacob sent the *Shekhinah*, for the *yud* [in *Ya'akov*; *yud*=10] corresponds to the ten forms that are enclosed in the seven days of building (i.e., creation), which corresponds to the *ayin* [in *Ya'akov*; *ayin*=70], each day containing within it the ten forms ($7 \times 10 = 70$). But the truth is, each of the ten *sefirot* contain the ten forms, corresponding to the *kof* [in *Ya'akov*; *kof*=100] ($10 \times 10 = 100$). How does this happen? Through [the *sefirah* of] *binah*, which corresponds to the *bet* [in *Ya'akov*]. [And what did he send?] Angels, as it is written in *Ketuvim*, "The angels who dwell on high..." (referring to the upper worlds). [They were sent] to Esau his brother, who symbolizes the world of *Assiyah* (the World of Creation). [In this way, Jacob effected a *yihud*, connecting the upper world with the lower world.]

Explication: The Besht seems to appreciate the "exoteric" reasons why most people pray.

However, he explains in this *ma'amar* the true, "esoteric" reasons: "to raise the hidden sparks of the *Shekhinah* upward" and to effect *yihudim*. The injunction to pray for the needs of the *Shekhinah* is directly related to the central kabbalistic concern for freeing the *Shekhinah* from the evil forces that afflict her. He then applies *gematria* and kabbalistic symbols to the opening verses of *parashat va-yishlach* to support his teaching.

צ

יש בחי' שאחר עלותו למעלה חזר
ויורד כדי להעלות מדריגות
התחתונות בסוד רחצתי את רגלי ודיס
רצוא ושוב ונקרא קטנות וגדלות ובכל
ירידה צריך אזהרה איך לחזור ולעלות
שלא ישאר חיו כמיש הבעש"ט יש
כמה שנשארו.

90) There is a stage in which, after ascending on high one descends again in order to elevate the lower levels. This is the mystical meaning of the verse, "I washed my feet."¹⁷⁴ This is the real meaning of [the expression] "going forward and retreating,"¹⁷⁵ which is also called constrictedness and expansiveness. Every descent, however, requires a plan for how one is to return and re-ascend, lest he remain there [below], Heaven forbid. As the Baal Shem Tov said, there are many who remained [below].¹⁷⁶

Explication: The kabbalistic concept "*ratzo v'shov*" is discussed earlier in the explications to *ma'amarim* 1 and 10 and in the introductory discussion on the doctrine of *yeridah tzorech aliyah*.

צד

מבעש"ט ידיבק מחשבתו באור
א"ס שבתוך האותיות שהוא אור
פני מלך חיים והוא כלל גדול בתורה
ותפלה גם מסוגל לבטל הדינין.

94) From the Besht: One shall cleave his thought to the light of *Ein Sof* that is within the letters. [That light] is the light of the face of the King of life, and this is a great principle of Torah and prayer. It also serves as good fortune to nullify judgements.

Explication: It is not clear whether the good fortune is accrued by virtue of the cleaving, the light of *Ein Sof* or the face of the King. Regardless, the effect is fortuitous.

צז

מהבעש"ט פ"י פ' תפלה לעני כי
יעטוף ולפני ה' ישפוך שיחו

97) From the Besht concerning the verse: "A prayer of a lowly person when he is faint and pours forth his

¹⁷⁴ *Song of Songs* 5:3; One has to bend down to wash his feet, but in doing so he "elevates" himself.

¹⁷⁵ "*ratzo v'shov*." See note 1. in #1.

¹⁷⁶ This warning seems to be in reference to the four who entered *Pardes* (*Hagigah* 14b) Only Akiva returned safely because he knew how to return.

ע"פ משל שהכריז המלך ביום שמחתו
 כל מי שיבקש דבר מן המלך ימלאו
 לו בקשתו ויש מי שביקש שררה
 וכבוד ויש שביקש עושר ונתנו לכ"א
 מבוקשו והי' שם חכם א' שאמר
 ששאלתו ומבוקשו שידבר המלך
 בעצמו עמו ג"פ ביום והוטב מאד
 בעיני המלך מאחר שדברו חביב
 עליו מן עושר וכבוד לכן ימלא
 בקשתו שיתנו לו רשות ליכנס בהיכלו
 לדבר עמו ושם יפתחו לו האוצרות
 שיקח מן עושר וכבוד ג"כ וז"ש תפלה
 לעני וגו' לפני ה' ישפוך שיחו שזה
 מבוקשו.

conversation before God."¹⁷⁷ [It may be explained] by an analogy: A king proclaimed on the day of his rejoicing that whoever wanted to request something from the king, he would grant his request. There were those who requested power and honor and those who requested wealth, and he gave to each one that which was requested. But there was one wise person there who said that his petition and request was that the king himself would speak to him three times a day. This pleased the king very much that someone preferred speaking with him more than wealth and honor. Thus his request was granted that he be permitted to enter his chamber and speak with him. And there were opened for him the treasures so that he might also acquire wealth and honor. So this is [the meaning of] what is said: "A prayer of a lowly person..." [that is] "before God he will pour forth his conversation," for that is his request.

Explication: The text indicates that God clearly prefers the prayer of one whose interest lies only in sharing intimacy with the Divine. Nevertheless, the analogy implies that less spiritual interests are also served. All those who turn to the king have their requests fulfilled. Moreover, while the highest type of prayer involves no ulterior motives, God makes sure that his favorite also receives wealth and honor.

קט

מהבעש"ט מי שרוצה ליפטר
 מהצער והמיצר והוא נוסע
 אחריו משל לאשה יולדת שהלכה
 למקום אחר לפטור מחבלי ליזה
 הצער הולך אחריו ועצה היעוצה
 שיתפלל להשיי ויפטר מהצער וז"ש

109) From the Besht: One may want to escape from unbearable suffering, but it follows after him. It is like a pregnant woman who goes to another place to escape from the labor of childbirth, but the pain follows her. The best advice is for one to pray to God that he be relieved of his suffering. That is [what is meant by]

¹⁷⁷ Psalms 102:1.

מִן הַמִּצַּר קִרְאתִי יְהוָה עֲנֵנִי בִמְרוֹחַב יְהוָה
 חִשׁ הִנֵּה מִצְרִים נוֹסֵעַ אַחֲרֵיהֶם אֲזַי
 הִבִּינִי זֶה לִכְךָ וַיִּצְעְקוּ בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל
 אֶל ה' וּבֹאמֶת נֹאמַר אֲזַי כֹּאשֶׁר רָאִיתֶם
 אֶת מִצְרַיִם הַיּוֹם לֹא תוֹסִיפוּ לִרְאוֹתָם
 עוֹד עַד עוֹלָם.

what is said: "Out of distress I called out to Adonai and God answered me in the wide open space."¹⁷⁸ And this is [what is meant by] what is said: "...and behold, the Egyptians pursued them [and they were sore afraid]...."¹⁷⁹ [Back] then they understood this [advice mentioned above] and so "...the Israelites cried out unto the Lord." Naturally, this is what follows [in the text]: "Whereas you have seen the Egyptians today, you shall never see them again."¹⁸⁰

Explication: Here again we see the idea that suffering can lead one, out of necessity, to turn to God in prayer. He also uses the story of the exodus from Egypt as a metaphor for the personal redemption from narrowness (*mei'tzarim*), or in this case, pain and suffering.

קיא

מִהִבְעַשׁ"ט בְּשֵׁם הָרִאשׁוֹנִים רֵאוּי
 לִידַע סוֹד אֲחָדוֹתָיו יִתְבַּרְךְ כִּי
 בְכֹ"מ שֶׁאֵין תּוֹפֵס וְאוֹחֵז בְּקֶצֶה וְחֶלֶק
 מִן הָאֲחָדוֹת הָרִי אֵין תּוֹפֵס כּוֹל
 וְהַג' מֵאֲחֵד שְׁתּוּרָה וְהַמִּצְוֹת נִאֲצְלוּ
 מֵעֲצָמוֹתַי ית' שֶׁהֵיא אֲחָדוֹת הָאֵמִיתִי
 אֵיךְ כְּשֶׁמִּקְיִים מִצְוָה אַחַת עַל מְבוֹנָה
 וּבִאֲהָבָה שֶׁהֵיא הַדְּבִיקוֹת בּוֹ וְתוֹפֵס
 בְּמִצְוָה זֶה חֶלֶק הָאֲחָדוֹת אֵיךְ כּוֹל
 בִּידּוֹ כֹּאֵל קִיִּים כָּל הַמִּצְוֹת שֶׁהֵם
 כְּלֻלֹת אֲחָדוֹתָיו וְכִשְׁנֵפֶל עָלָיו אֵיזָה
 שִׂמְחָה יִדְבֵּק בְּשִׂמְחָתוֹ יִתְבַּרְךְ שְׁתּוּרָה
 שׁוֹרֵשׁ הַכֹּל.

111) From the Besht: in the name of the early sages, one should know the mystery of God's Oneness: that whenever I grasp and hold fast a corner or [small] portion of the Oneness, behold, I hold fast to its entirety. Therefore, since the Torah and the *mitzvot* were emanated from God's Essence, this is the true Oneness. This being the case, when one fulfills one *mitzvah* properly and with love, this is [simultaneously an act of] clinging to Him and holding fast to that *mitzvah*, which is a part of [God's] Oneness. This being the case, God's unity is in his hand as if he fulfilled all of the *mitzvot*, since they, in their entirety, comprise God's Oneness. When one experiences the joy [from doing this], he is "clinging" to God's joy (implying a complete, almost

¹⁷⁸Psalm 118:5.

¹⁷⁹Exodus 14:10.

¹⁸⁰Exodus 14:13.

sexual type of enjoyment), since He is the root of everything. (He is literally partaking of God's joy.)

Explication: Here the Besht reiterates what was stated in *ma'amar* 65: that grasping a small portion of God's Oneness is like grasping its entirety. Based on this principle, holding fast to one *mitzvah*, which comes from the Torah and partakes of God's Oneness, is like holding fast, or "clinging" to God Himself. In this way, one is able to attain a state of *devekut* in one's daily activities. This has two benefits. First, based on the above principle, the fulfillment of one *mitzvah* becomes equal to the fulfillment of them all. Secondly, one enjoys the bliss of being connected to the root of everything.

קמז

מבעש"ט אם לא תדעי לך היפה
בנשים צאי לך בעקבי הצאן
ע"פ ביאור משנה איזהו חכם הלומד
מכל אדם ע"פ משל המסתכל במראה
יודע חסרונו כו' כך ברואה חסרון
זולתו יודע שיש בו שמץ מנהו וכו'.

116) From the Besht: "If you do not know, Oh fairest of women, go follow the tracks of the sheep...."¹⁸¹ (This verse is that of a shepherd telling his lover where he may be found.) [This can be interpreted] in light of an explication of the mishnah: "Who is wise? One who learns from everyone."¹⁸² This will become clear by a parable: one who looks in a mirror sees his [own] defects. Thus, in seeing a deficiency in his fellow man, he becomes aware that there is a trace of [that deficiency] in himself. (God allows us to see defects in others only so we can become aware of those same defects in ourselves.)

Explication: The Besht juxtaposes the verses from Song of Songs and *Pirke Avot* to explain where one can find what he is looking for. If the lover wants to find the shepherd, she should follow the tracks of the sheep. If one seeks wisdom, he should learn

¹⁸¹ Song of Songs 1:8

¹⁸² *Pirke Avot*, perek 4, mishna 1

from everyone. Likewise, if one wants to become aware of his own deficiencies, he should take note of the deficiencies he is aware of in others.

קלג

אשרי העם יודעי תרועה פי' תבועש"ט ע"פ משל למדינה שהיה להם גבור ובטחו עליו כל בני המדינה ולא למדו נימוסי המלחמה כי סמכו עצמם על הגבור שהיה ביניהם ואח"כ בעת המלחמה שרצה הגבור להכין כלי זיינו והשונא נתחכם וגנב ממנו כלי זיינו אחד לאחד עד שלא נשאר לו כמה להלחם וגם אנשי המדינה שסמכו עליו נלכדו עמו וז"ש **אשרי** העם יודעי תרועה ר"ל בשהעם אינם סומכים על הגבור רק הם עצמם יודעים תרועת המלחמה ואז באור פניך יהלכון לקראת המלך וכמ"ש הסור נהגו להתענות ער"ה ואינן סומכים על הגדולים ואם אמר זה בדורו ב"ש עתה אפשר שהגבור בעצמו אינו יודע נימוסי המלחמה ואין לו כלי זיק.

133) "Happy is the people who know the joyful sound."¹⁸³ The Besht interpreted this verse by the following parable: There was a country in which there lived a hero. All the inhabitants of that country relied on him [to protect them] and consequently did not learn the art of warfare for they entrusted themselves to their hero. Eventually, when a war broke out, the hero wanted to prepare his weapons, but the enemy had tricked him and stole his weapons one by one until there was none left with which to fight. Thus, all the inhabitants of that country who had relied on him were captured with him. This is [the meaning alluded to in] the verse: "Happy is the people who know the joyful sound," namely, when the people do not rely on the hero, but know for themselves the sound of war. Then, "[O Lord,] they shall walk in the light of Thy countenance,"¹⁸⁴ "to meet the king."¹⁸⁵

As it is written in the *Tur* (*Shulchan Aruch*): "They have a custom to fast on *Erev Rosh Hashanah*"¹⁸⁶ and they did not rely on the mighty ones. If he said this in his generation, how much the moreso now, when it's possible that even the mighty one himself doesn't know the tactics of war nor does he have the weapons.

¹⁸³ Psalms 89:16a.

¹⁸⁴ Psalms 89:16b.

¹⁸⁵ probably II Samuel 19:16.

¹⁸⁶ *Orach Chayyim* _____?

Explication: In this *ma'amar*, the Besht advises every individual to address himself directly to God and to engage in battle with the forces of evil and not to trust “great men” to do this on his behalf. This is in striking contrast to the unconditional reliance on the *tzaddik* that was later advocated in Hasidism only a generation or two after the Besht.

קלח

מבעש"ט פי' הגמ' כרום זלות
לבי'א דברים העומדים ברומו
של עולם ובי'א מזולין בה והכוונה
לפי שהפעול' של התפלה הוא ברומו
של עולם ולא למטה לפעמים ולכך
בי'א מזולין בה לחשבם שתפלתם
חיו לריק חה אינו.

138) From the Besht: [Regarding the scriptural verse]: "...*k'rum z'lut li-v'nei adam*,"¹⁸⁷ the *gemorrah* explains [it's meaning as follows]: "There are things that stand in the heights of the universe, but which people revile."¹⁸⁸ The meaning [of this verse] is that the outcome of prayer is manifest "in the heights of the universe," and is not always discernable [in the physical world.] Therefore, people treat prayer lightly, thinking that their prayer, Heaven forbid, is ineffective, but that is not [really] the case.

Explication: The Besht defends the efficacy of prayer by saying that its outcome is not always discernable in the physical world. He only hints at the Lurianic idea that prayer can affect, and even direct, the sefirotic potencies in the supernal realm.

קנ

בכל עסקי עה"ז יש בו תכלית
פנימי.

150) Everything in which one is involved in this world has an inner purpose.

Explication: The Besht does not articulate here what exactly the inner purpose is to which he alludes, although it can be inferred from his teachings. The point of this *ma'amar* seems to provide an assurance that whatever happens does not happen in vain.

¹⁸⁷ Psalm 12:9 "The wicked walk on every side, when the trivial is exalted among the sons of men."

¹⁸⁸ In *Berachot* 6b, R. Bivi bar Abaye explains why the verse is worded in such an obscure manner. Rather than reading it as "when the trivial is exalted," he reads "when the exalted is trivialized."

קם

עוֹד מֵהַבְּעֵשֶׂט בִּיאוֹר סוּד אֲב כו
 אֵיךְ שְׁצִרִיךְ לַעֲשׂוֹת בְּכָל תִּיבָה
 הַכְנָעָה וְהַבְּדִלָה וְהַמְתָּקָה רִ"ל כִּי
 דִּינֵי שֶׁ"ךְ וּפִ"ר הֶרְמוֹז בְּתִיבַת אֲדֹנֵי
 דְּפִתִּיחַת תְּפִלַּת יִ"ה כָּל הַכוּוֹנוֹת שִׁישׁ
 שֶׁם צִרִיךְ לִכְוִין בְּכָל תִּיבָה וְדִיבּוֹר
 לַהֲמַתִּיק הַדִּינִין כִּי אוֹת א' הוּא סוּד
 פֶּלֶא וְנִתְלַבֵּשׁ בְּאוֹת ב' שֶׁהוּא ב' אֲלֶפֶין
 עַד אוֹת ת' ד' מֵאוֹת אֲלֶפֶין וְכָל
 שֶׁנִּתְרַחֵק הָאוֹת נִתְרַחֵק מֵהַחַיּוֹת וְנִתְלַבֵּשׁ
 בְּקִלְיָנוֹת עַד מֵ"ל שְׁבַמ"ל שֶׁהֵם מֵ"ז
 וְכֹאשֶׁר יֵתֵן אֶל לְבוֹ גְּלוֹת הַשְּׁכִינָה
 שֶׁהִי נִיצוֹץ הַשְּׁכִינָה מְלוּכָשׁ כְּתוּב
 כִּיעוֹר הַקְּלִיפּוֹת יִתְחַרֵּד חֲרָדָה גְּדוּלָה
 וְאֵז יִתְפַּרְדּוּ כָּל פּוּעֵלֵי אוֹן וְנַעֲשֶׂה
 יַחַד יֵרָאֶה עִם נוֹרָא וְנִתְבָּרַר נִיצוֹץ
 הַקְּדוֹשׁ וְנִתְחַבֵּר לְמַעְלָה אֶל הַחַיּוֹת
 בְּסוּד וְהַחַיּוֹת רְצוּא וְשׁוּב וְהוּא גְּאוּלָּה
 מֵהַשְּׁבִיָּה וְהוּא הַכְנָעָה כֹּאֲלוֹ אֵינוֹ מְדַבֵּר
 רַק הַשְּׁכִינָה וְהַבְּדִלֵי לְהַפְרִיד הַקְּלִיפּוֹת
 כִּי הַמְתָּקָה לְהַעֲלוֹתָן לְהַמְתָּקָן בְּשֶׁרֶשׁן
 כִּי וְשִׁמּוֹר כָּלֵל גְּדוּלָה זֶה

160) Also from the Besht: An explanation of the real *aleph-bet*. What one should do with each/every letter: *hachna'ah* (subduing), *havdalah* (separation) and *hamtakah* (sweetening), which is to say, just as when the judgements, the breaking of the vessels and the terrible mishap are alluded to in the letters [in the word] *ADONAI* in the opening verse of the *Shemoneh Esrei*, all the meditations that are there should be meditated on in each word and phrase to sweeten the judgements, for the letter '*aleph*' is really a wonder ('*aleph*' spelled backwards is '*peleh*', wonder) and is clothed in the letter '*bet*', which equals 2 '*aleph*'s up until the letter '*tav*,' which equals 400 '*aleph*'s. Anyone who is removed from the letter is removed from the life and is clothed in the *kelipot* until the "kingdom that is in the kingdom,"¹⁸⁹ which are strange thoughts. When one thinks about the exile of the *Shekhinah*, that a spark of the *Shekhinah* has been enclothed within the ugliness of the *kelipot*, he will tremble a great tremble and "all evildoers shall be scattered"¹⁹⁰ and a *yihud* will be effected between fear and awe and the holy sparks will be refined and will be united above to the life energy. In truth, the life energy runs forward and back and this is redemption from captivity, and this is the *hachna'ah* (subduing) as if no one is speaking but the *Shekhinah*. *Havdalah* (separation) refers to separating the *kelipot*, etc. *Hamtakah* (sweetening) means to elevate them and sweeten them in their source, etc. Cherish this great principle.

Explication: (Please see the discussions pertaining to subduing, separating and sweetening in the explications accompanying *ma'amarim* 7 and 28.)

¹⁸⁹ When each of the 7 sefirot are multiplied by 7, we have 49 levels, The 'kingdom of the kingdom' refers to the lowest of these 49 levels.

קסז

ברורותינו שאנו במעט השכל מאד
מאד צריך להתחזק ביראת
ה' ולהתבודד מחשבתו תמיד ביראה
ובאימה ואפי' בעת הלימוד טוב לנח
מעט בכל פעם מלמודו ולהתבודד
מחשבתו ואף שמחמת זה יתבטל קצת
מלמודו כי לא המדרש כו'.

167) In this generation, our understanding [of spiritual matters] is extremely low [as compared to previous generations]. [Therefore,] it is necessary to strengthen one's awe of God, and to frequently meditate in awe and fear. Even if it is during one's study of Torah, it is good to pause a little every now and then from his study to meditate. Although, on account of this, he may forego his studies a bit, [it is necessary to do so] "for study is not [the most important thing but, rather, its actualization]."¹⁹¹

Explication: This *ma'amar* raises the issue which was at the core of the conflict between Hasidic and traditional attitudes toward Torah study. In Hasidism, the attainment of *devekut* took precedence. Even earlier, in the teachings of the kabbalists of Safed, the ultimate purpose of learning Torah was pneumatic and not primarily the acquisition of knowledge.¹⁹² This attitude is discussed in detail in *Sheney Luchot ha-Brit*. One passage attributes to R. Isaac Luria the view that a specific period of time should be set aside for uniting one's mind with God in *devekut*. Moreover, this practice is declared seven times more valuable than time spent on Torah study.¹⁹³ According to the *Sefer Haredim*, it is seventy times more valuable for the soul than Torah study.¹⁹⁴

קעד

בנמרא דבר גדול דבר קטן דיג
מעשה מרכבה דבר קטן והיות

174) The *gemorrah* says: "There are great matters and small matters. A great matter is the *Ma'aseh Merkavah* (the earliest form of Jewish mysticism). A trivial matter is the scholarly debate

¹⁹¹ *Pirke Avot* 1:17

¹⁹² See Piekarz, "Beginning of Hasidism," pp. 346-360. Also see Lawrence Fine, "The Study of Torah as a Rite of Theurgical Contemplation in Lurianic Kabbalah," in David Blumenthal, ed., *Approaches to Judaism in Medieval Times*, v. 3 (Atlanta, 1968), pp. 29-40.

¹⁹³ Quoted by Piekarz, *ibid.* p. 353.

¹⁹⁴ Davis, *The Way of Flame*, p. 1.

דאביי ורבא וק' שיקראהו ח"ו להיות
 דאביי ורבא דבר קטן כי זה עיקר
 תורתנו הנאמר בסיני אלא ה"פ באמת
 הן תורה נגלות הן הנסתרות הכל סוג
 א' כי הכל הולך אחר כוונת האדם
 אם כוונתו לידע עניינה לבד אינו
 זוכה לשום דבר ועליו נאמר וכל
 חסדו כציץ השדה אבל אם כוונתו
 שחושק לדביקות הש"י להיות מרכבה
 לו ואין לזה דרך כ"א ע"י התורה
 והמצות אזי הן ע"י תורה נגלות הן
 ע"י תורה נסתרות יזכה להיות מרכבה
 לו ית' וז"ש דבר קטן היות דאביי
 ורבא ר"ל מי שלומד לחדור לתענוג
 וצורך עצמו הוא דבר קטן פירוש
 שעובד הש"י בדבר קטן וכאין הוא
 שהרי הוא רק כמו שחושק לדבר
 חכמה אחרת אבל מי שחושק להיות
 מרכבה לו ית' ע"י התורה הוא דבר
 גדול וזהו דבר גדול מעשה מרכבה
 ר"ל לעשות עצמו מרכבה להשי"ת
 ע"י התורה.

(*havayot*) between Abaye and Rabah."¹⁹⁵ It is difficult to understand how the debate between Abaye and Rabbah could be called "a trivial matter." [These disputes deal with] the most important aspects of our Torah, which was given at Sinai. However, here is the real explanation: The revealed and hidden aspects of the Torah are essentially of one subject matter, for everything depends on the intention of the individual. If it is his intention only to know [the Torah's] contents, he will not acquire anything. About him it is written, "[All flesh is like grass,] and all its goodness like flowers of the field. [Grass withers, flowers fade when the breath of the Lord blows on them.]"¹⁹⁶ However, if one seeks [to acquire] a passion for cleaving to God and become a *merkavah* (vehicle) for Him, the only way to do so is through the Torah and *mitzvot*. Then, whether one engages in the revealed teachings or the esoteric teachings, he will be worthy of being a *merkavah* for God. This is [what is meant by] what is said [in the *gemorrah*]: "A trivial matter is the debate between Abaye and Rabbah." This alludes to one who studies [merely] to derive pleasure and to satisfy his personal needs. Such study is a trivial matter. This means that he is serving God in a way that is trivial and unimportant, for to him [studying Torah] is only like the investigation into any other field of knowledge. But the one who studies the Torah in order to become a *merkavah* for God, this is a great matter. [Thus the *gemorrah* says]: "A great matter is the *Ma'aseh Merkavah*." This alludes [to one who] makes himself a *merkavah* for God by means of the Torah.¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁵ *Succah* 28a and *Hagigah* ?; *havayot* refer to talmudic disputes in general.

¹⁹⁶ Isaiah 40:6-7

¹⁹⁷ See *Rechev Israel* by R. Mordechai Sariki citing R. Moses Chayim Luzzatto's *Adir Ba Marom*, p. 219.

Explication: The problem with self interest, even in the service of God, is that it necessitates a diversion of attention from its proper object, the Divine Presence. In a value system which places *devekut* and experiential knowledge of God at its summit, this is a serious flaw. Thus, one's study of Torah "merely to derive pleasure and to satisfy his personal needs," is a trivial matter.

קעז

שם"מ כי יראת העונש שהוא יראה
חיצונית מורה על ידו יתברך
פשוטה לקבל שבים ויתעורר מזה
לירא פנימיות הנקרא אהבה לקבל
באהבה ואז יפטור מירא חיצונית וכך
ודפח"ה.

177) I heard from my Master that the fear [of divine] retribution is a physical aspect [of the fear of God.] This is referred to [by the image of] God's hand "outstretched to receive those who repent."¹⁹⁸ [The external fear] awakens the spiritual aspect of fear, which is called love, [the willingness] to receive [punishment] in love. Then one will be exempt from the physical aspect of fear, and so on. "The words of a wise man's mouth are gracious."¹⁹⁹

Explication: In this and other *ma'amarim*, the Besht teaches that ^{the} physical often leads to the spiritual.²⁰⁰ In this case, the physical aspect of fear leads to the spiritual aspect of fear, which is love.

קצב

והנה בענין הדביקות י"א הדביקות
הוא כשאומר תיבה אחת והוא
מאריך באותה תיבה הרבה שמחמת
דביקות אינו רוצה לפרוד עצמו
מהתיבה כ"י וי"א הדביקות הוא
כשעושה מצוה או עוסק בתורה ועושה
הגוף כסא

192) There are two types of *devekut*. Some say it occurs when a person says a word [of a prayer] and he extends the pronunciation of that word for a long time because, [being] in *devekut*, he does not want to separate himself from the word, etc. (i.e., and the experience it induces.) Others say that *devekut* is when one does a *mitzvah* or studies Torah and the body becomes a seat

¹⁹⁸ from the *Machzor*, in the *Yom Kippur Neilah* service

¹⁹⁹ Ecclesiastes 10:12

לנפש וגפש לרוח ורוח
 לנשמה והנשמה כסא לאור שכינה
 שעל ראשו וכאלו האור מתפשט סביבו
 והוא בתוך האור יושב ויגיל ברעדה
 וגם ע"כ השמים הם כחצי כדור בכל
 מקום.

for the soul (*nefesh*) and the soul [becomes a seat] for the spirit (*ruach*) and the spirit for the *neshamah* (higher soul) and the *neshamah* [becomes] a seat for the light of the *Shekhinah*, so that it [rests] upon his head. It is as if the light spreads around him and he dwells within the light and "he rejoices with trembling."²⁰¹ Also, if this is so, the heavens are like a hemisphere everywhere.

Explication: This *ma'amar* describes two types of *devekut*. The first seems to focus more on the external aspect of the experience, describing it in terms of how someone may recite his prayers. The other is a much more internalized or subjective account. In that description, each aspect of the worshipper's being becomes subservient to a higher aspect. Medieval Jewish psychology recognizes five such aspects, but most discussions only concern the first three: *nefesh*, *ruach* and *neshamah*.

קצה

ריב"ש אמר כשהוא דבוק בבורא
 ית' ונופל לו איזה מחשבה
 מאיזה דבר מסתמא הוא כך כמו שנופל
 במחשבתו זהו רוח הקודש מועט.

195) R. Israel Besht said: When one cleaves to the Creator and a thought suddenly occurs to him about a certain matter, it is probably true just as it occurred in his thoughts. This is a minor case of *ruach hakodesh* (i.e., prophecy or divine inspiration).²⁰²

Explication: In earlier kabbalistic writings, there is a connection between the state of *devekut* and prophecy, both of which occur from some sort of communion between man and God. The patriarchs, Moses, and the prophets were described as people who achieved a lasting state of *devekut*. When *devekut* is achieved, *Ruach ha-Kodesh* ("The

²⁰⁰ See Mm. 20, 63, 109

²⁰¹ Psalms 2:11.

²⁰² see *Likkutei Moharan* I:138.

Holy Spirit”) comes into contact with the mystic and gives him superhuman spiritual abilities.

קצח

מִיָּד כְּשֹׁמֵר אֲדִינִי שְׁפִתֵי תִפְתַּח
הַשְׁכִּינָה מִתְּלַבֶּשֶׁת בּוֹ וּמְדַבֶּרֶת
בּוֹ כָּל הַדְּבָרִים וְכֹשִׁיחַ לֹו הָאֱמוּנָה
שֶׁהַשְׁכִּינָה מְדַבֶּרֶת תִּפּוֹל עָלָיו יִרְאֶה
וְגַם הַקַּבָּלָה מִצְמָצֵם עֲצָמוֹ וְשׁוֹרָה אֲצִלּוֹ
בּוֹ.

198) As soon as one says “Ad-nai, open my lips [that my mouth may declare Your glory]”²⁰³ the *Shekhinah* enclothes itself within him and speaks through him.²⁰⁴ When one becomes convinced that the *Shekhinah* speaks through him, he will be overcome by awe, at which point the Holy One, blessed be He, will constrict Himself and rest upon him.

Explication: Just as what is essential in every being and every action is the ray of divine energy which takes form in the object, so the very impulse to worship is itself a ray from the divine source. As one ascends in *devekut*, the divine emanations return to their source. Experientially at this stage, one enters an ecstatic state in which all aspects of one’s own powers are eradicated. It is as if the divinity itself were uttering his prayer. In this state, one becomes merely a passive vessel empowered by God.

קצט

הַתַּפְשׁוּת הַגִּשְׁמִיּוֹת הֵוא שְׂאִינוֹ
מְרַגֵּשׁ כָּלֵל הַרְגֶּשֶׁת הַגּוֹף וְצִיּוֹר
זֶה הָעוֹלָם רַק צִיּוֹר הָעוֹלָמוֹת הָעֲלִיּוֹנִים
דִּהְיִינוּ הַמַּלְאָכִים וְשֶׁרָפִים וְאַחֵר כֵּךְ
כְּשֶׁבָא לָעוֹלָם הָאֲצִילוֹת אֵינוֹ מְרַגֵּשׁ
רַק דֵּק מִן הַדֵּק דִּהְיִינוּ אֲצִילוֹת יִתְּ
וְשֵׁם יוֹדֵעַ עֲתִידוֹת וּלְפַעְמִים בְּעוֹלָמוֹת
הַתַּחְתּוֹנִים יוֹדֵעַ גַּיַּב עֲתִידוֹת שֵׁשׁ
מִכְרִיזִין הַכְּרוּבִים.

199) The stripping off of one’s corporeality is when one doesn’t feel any bodily sensations, nor [see] any images of this world, but only images of the higher worlds, that is to say, the angels and *serafim*. Once he reaches the world of *atzilut* [the World of Emanation] he only feels things in a very subtle way, as this is the [most sublime] emanation of God. There he knows future events; and sometimes he also knows future events in the lower worlds that are foretold by the angels [whom he can see and hear].

²⁰³ Psalm 51:17, recited as a prelude to the *Amidah*

ריב"ש אמר בענין עובדא זו כשאני
מדבק מחשבתי בבורא ית' אני
מניח הפה לדבר מה שירצה כי אני
מקשר הדברים בשורש העליון בבורא
ית' שכ"ד יש לו שורש למעלה
בספירות.

R. Israel Baal Shem Tov said concerning this experience: When I attach my thoughts to the Creator, I allow my mouth [to say] whatever it wants, because I attach the words to their supernal root in the Creator, for everything has a root above in the *sefirot*.

Explication: Here the Besht describes the extraordinary experience of the "stripping off one's corporeality." It is not a literal "stripping off" but more like a dis-identification from the material realm. In this state, he is so connected to the Divine realm that it seems to speak through him.

רה

הלואי שיהיה מורא שמים עליכם
כמורא ב"ו למשל כשישן ובא
רבו והקיץ אותו בידו מיד הוא נרתע
ומודעוץ לפניו ומכ"ש שכשהשיי
מקיצו משנתו שהוא בחצות לילה
כידוע.

205) "If only one were to fear heaven as much as one fears flesh and blood."²⁰⁵ An example: If one were sleeping and his teacher came and nudged him with his hand, he would immediately be startled and tremble before him [the teacher]. How much the moreso (*u'mkol sh'chein*) when God awakens him from his sleep at midnight, as is known [by the *Hasidim*].²⁰⁶

Explication: Kabbalists were well known for their midnight vigils, for weeping and wailing each night over the exile of God's Presence, for the weeping of Rachel, and the destruction of the Temple, after which they would engage in study. This customs became widespread, and there were many who felt that it was obligatory.²⁰⁷

²⁰⁴ In kabbalistic literature, the *Shekhinah* is identified with the voice of one in prayer. See *Zohar* III:230a, 281b; *Tikkunei Zohar*, *Tikkun* 18, 38b; *Likkutei Moharan* 1:42, 48, 78; *ibid.* II:84.

²⁰⁵ *Berachot* 28b

²⁰⁶ This refers to the custom of waking at midnight to mourn the destruction of the Temple and the exile of the Jewish people. See *Shulchan Aruch*, *Orach Chayim* 1:3; *Zohar* III, *Acharei* 68a, *ibid.*, *Balak* 46a; *Zohar Chadash*, *Balak* 23b.

²⁰⁷ *Dinur*, p. 171 and 208, n. 324-26.

אין כאלקינו הוא בעולם העשיה
 שהוא כמו ספר שבודאי א"א
 לטעות מי כאלקינו הוא ביצירה
 שאפשר חלילה לטעות כמו אחר שראה
 מס"ס כו' אך אני איני טועה כי מי
 כאלקינו נודה לאלקינו הוא בבריאה
 ששם א"א לטעות מפני שקרובה
 לאצילות ובאצילות אומר לנוכח ברוך
 וגם אתה הוא אלקינו טעם למה אנו
 אומרים אלקינו ואלקי אבותינו כי יש
 שני מיני בני אדם המאמינים בהש"י
 א' שמאמין בהקב"ה מחמת קבלת
 אבותיו ועכ"ז אמונתו חזקה והב' מי
 שבא על האמנת הדת מחמת החקירה
 והחילוק ביניהם הוא שהא' יש לו
 מעלה שא"א לפתות אותו אף אם
 יאמרו לו כמה חקירות הסותרות ח"ו
 כי אמונתו חזקה מצד קבלת אבותיו
 ועוד שלא חקר מעולם אבל יש לו
 חסרון שהאמונה אצלו הוא רק מצות

206) "Ein keiloheinu – There is none like our God."

This [first verse of the popular hymn by this name, corresponds to] the World of *Assiyah* (Action). [On this level, which is [as self-evident] as a book, in that it's absolutely impossible to make a mistake. "Mi keiloheinu – Who is like our God?" This [second verse corresponds to the World of] *Yetzirah* (Formation), in which it is possible, Heaven forbid, "to make a mistake like Acher, who saw Metatron...."²⁰⁸ But I am not mistaken, for "Who is like God?" "Nodeh leiloheinu – Let us give thanks to our God." [This third verse corresponds to the World of] *Beriyah* (Creation) for there it is impossible to make a mistake because it is close to [the World of] *Atzilut* (Emanation) and in *Atzilut* we speak [to God directly] in the second person: "Baruch..." and also "Ata hu elokeinu" [Blessed are You, He is our God.]

[The verses that follow, one of which mentions "our fathers," bring us to the following question.] Why do we say "Our God and God of our fathers?" Because there are two types of people who believe in God. One believes in God because it is the tradition of his fathers. Nonetheless (*v'im kol ze*), his faith is strong. The second comes to religious faith through [his own] investigation. The distinction between them is that the first one has an advantage insofar as it is impossible to sway him. Even if someone were to present him with contradictory beliefs, Heaven forbid, his faith is strong on the basis of the tradition of his fathers, as well as the fact that he never questioned it. However, he does have a disadvantage, insofar as he possesses his faith only as a

²⁰⁸ *Hagigah* 15a; a reference to the story of the four who entered Pardes. Acher saw the angel Metatron, and later became a heretic.

אנשים מלומדה בלי טעם ושכל אבל
הב' יש לו מעלה שמחמת שהכיר
הבורא ית' מחמת גודל חקירתו היא
חזק אצלו באמונה שלימה ובאהבה
גמורה אבל ג"כ יש לו חסרון שבקל
יכול לפתותו ואם יביאו לו ראיות
הסותרות אמונתו יתפתה ח"ו אבל
מי שב' המדות בידו אין למעלה ממנו
דהיינו שסומך על אבותיו הקדמונים
בחזק וג"כ באה לו שחקר בעצמו
זו היא אמונה שלימה וטובה ולזה אנו
אומרים אלקינו מצד חקירתנו ואלקי
אבותינו מצד קבלתינו וכ"כ בתשובת
פנים מאירות דעכ"א אלקי אברהם
אלקי יצחק ואלקי יעקב ואין אומרים
אלקי אברהם יצחק ויעקב לומר לך
דיצחק ויעקב לא סמכו על קבלתם
מאברהם אלא חקרו האלקות בעצמם.

"commandment of habitual people," [performed mechanically] without reason or understanding.

But the second one has an advantage in that he recognized the Creator as the result of his great searching. [This recognition of God] is firmly established with absolute faith and complete love. Yet, he too has a disadvantage in that he can easily be swayed, for if someone came to him with a contradictory belief, his faith could be swayed, Heaven forbid.

But one who possesses both qualities has the greatest advantage. That is to say, that he relies on his forefathers in strength and also this faith comes to him on account of his own investigation. This is perfect and good faith. That is why we say "Our God," on account of our own philosophical investigation, and "God of our fathers" to acknowledge the tradition we have received.

Thus it is written in *Tshuvat Panim Meior*²⁰⁹: therefore we recite "God of Abraham, God of Isaac and God of Jacob," and we do not say "God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob." This teaches you that Isaac and Jacob did not rely on what they received from Abraham, but rather on their own search for the Divine.

Explication: This *ma'amar* seems to be a compilation of two separate sayings, both of which speak for themselves.

רמז

ריב"ש ע"ה אמר כשאדם טובע
בנהר והוא מראה במים כמו
תנועות שיוציא עצמו מן המים
השוטפים אותו בודאי הרואים לא
יתלוצצו עליו ועל תנועתו כן
כשמתפלל ועושה

215) R. Israel Besht, peace be upon him, said that when a person is drowning in a river, and he appears to be making motions to extract himself from the waters that sweep him away, observers will surely not laugh at him and his motions. So, too, when he prays and makes

תנועות אין להתלוצץ
עליו שהוא מציל עצמו ממים הזדונים
שהם הקליפות ומ"ז הבאים לבטלו
ממחשבתו בתפלתו.

רפז

צריך שירגיש במחשבתו שהוא
בעולם העשי' בתחלת התפלה
ואח"כ ירגיש שהוא ביצירה עולם
המלאכים והאופנים ואח"כ בעולם
הבריאה עד שירגיש במחשבתו שפרח
במחשבותיו גבוה מאד לעולם האצ"י
וכמו אדם שמטייל מחדר לחדר כן
יטייל במחשבתו בעולמות עליונים
ויזהר שלא יפול ממחשבתו הגבוהה
מאד בעולמות העליונים רק יחזיק
עצמו בכל כחו שישאר למעלה
במחשבותיו במתג ורסן שעשה כמו
גדר שלא ירד וכשרוצה לעשות כן
לצורך דביקות בלא שעת תפלה צריך
שלא יהי' שום אדם באותו בית שאפי'
צפופי עופות יכולים לבטלו וכן
מחשבה של אחר יכול לבטלו.

motions, one should not mock him when he tries to save himself from the 'evil waters' – i.e., the *kelipot* and extraneous thoughts which come to prevent him from having his mind on his prayer.

216) When beginning to pray, one should feel like he is in the World of *Assiyah* (Action). Afterwards, he should feel like he is in the World of *Yetzirah* (Formation), the world of angels and *ophanim* (celestial beings). After that, [he should feel like he is] in the World of *Beriyah* (Creation), until he feels like he has soared in his thoughts [to the] heights of the World of *Atzilut* (Emanation). Like a person who strolls from room to room, thus should he travel in his imagination to the supernal worlds.

One must be careful that he does not fall from this lofty state of mind [when he is imagining himself to be] in the supernal worlds. Rather, he should strengthen himself with all his power, so as to remain in this elevated state of mind, [as if] creating a restraint with a bridal and reins, to prevent himself from falling. When one wants to do this for the purpose [of achieving] *devekut*, at a time other than during prayer it is necessary that no one else be present. For if even the chirping of birds can disrupt him, so too can the thoughts of another person.²¹⁰

Explication: One context for practicing *devekut* is solitary contemplation (*hitbodedut*).

The practice here involves a form of meditation in which the journey through the four worlds of the Kabbalists that is ordinarily made during the morning prayers is replicated

²⁰⁹ *helek 1, sa'if 39.*

as an independent act of contemplation. Despite the fact that the desired state can easily be interrupted by external distractions, it seems there are occasions where it can be maintained even in company.

The extent to which a person requires isolation from others in order to practice *hitbodedut* depends on how strong his adhesion to God is. The danger of solitary *hitbodedut* seems to be that the soul in an intense state of *devekut* may expire in its longing to be reunited with its divine source. Hasidic legend attributes such a death too R. Yehiel Michael of Zlotchov.²¹¹

The Kabbalists had already conceived of prayer as a journey through the four worlds and had assigned sections of the morning liturgy to each of these worlds. However, according to the Lurianic approach, access to the supernal worlds depended on focusing the mind on appropriate combinations of divine names and recalling the specific kabbalistic processes that were occurring at every stage. These extra-liturgical aspects of prayer were called *kavvanot* (or intentions). However, in early Hasidism interest in Lurianic *kavvanot* began to be replaced by another notion of intention. Hasidic texts emphasize *kavvanah* in the sense of concentration on the object of prayer. Hasidic *kavvanah* thus indicates the intensity with which one turns his consciousness from materiality to the divine presence.

רי"ט

אמרנו עליו על ריב"ש ע"ה שזכה
לכל הארות המדריגות שהי' לו
הכל מחמת המקוואות שהי' תמיד
בטבילות

219) It is said about R. Israel Ba'al Shem Tov, may he be blessed, that he merited all his illuminations and levels by virtue of his constant *mikveh* immersions.

²¹⁰This and similar meditative techniques can be found in the work of R. Hayyim Vital (*Shaarei Kedushah* III:8) and R. Eliyahu of Vilna (*Sefer HaBrit*, Part II, *Eichut HaNevuah* 8:6; *ibid.*, *Sod Ruach Hakodesh*, 11:7)

²¹¹ Krassen, Miles. *Devequt and faith in zaddiqim: The religious tracts of Meshullam Feibush Heller of Zbarazh*, p. 124.

ומקוואות יותר בתמידות
טוב יותר מהתענית שהתענית מחליש
הגוף מעבודת השם ועוד יותר טוב
שהכח שהוא מניח בתענית יתן הכח
ההוא בלימוד התורה ותפלה שיתפלל
בכל כחו וכונתו ובוזו יבוא למדריגה.

רכח

ס"ג לחכמה שתיקה שכשהיא בשתיקה
יכול הוא לדבק עצמו בעולם
המחשבה שהיא חכמה.

רלב

וזהו מדריגה גדולה לאדם שיראה
תמיד בעין שכלו הש"י כמו
שמסתכל על אדם א' ויחשוב שגם
הבורא ית' מסתכל עליו כמו אדם
אחר המסתכל עליו כ"ז יהי תמיד
במחשבתו ובמחשבה זכה וברורה
וצלולה.

רלז

עונש הצדיקים בעה"ז והם כאלו
הקב"ה מתרחק מהם כדי
שיתקרבו יותר מלה"ד לכן קטן שאביו
מלמדו לילך כ"ז וריב"ש נתן סימן
ע"ז והוא ינהגנו עלמות.

Frequent [immersions in a] *mikveh* is superior to fasting, for fasting weakens the body from the service of God. Also, it is better that the strength one would expend on fasting be used for Torah study and prayer, so that one may pray with all one's strength and concentration, which leads one to spiritual ascent.

225) "The fence for wisdom is silence."²¹²

When one is silent, he is able to attach himself to the world of thought. This is called "wisdom."

232) A person reaches a high level who is always aware that God is like one who watches someone else; he thinks that the Creator is watching him, as if [any] other person were watching him. This should always be in one's mind as a pure, clear and lucid awareness.

237) The responsibility of the *tzaddikim* in this world: It is as if the Holy One, blessed be He, distanced [himself] from them to draw them closer. This is analogous to a small son and his father who is teaching the child to walk, etc.²¹³ R. Israel Besht exemplified this and "will guide us evermore."²¹⁴

²¹² *Avot* 3:17): "...The *masorah* is a fence to the Torah; tithes form a fence to wealth; vows are a fence to self-restraint; the fence for wisdom is silence."

²¹³ The parable appears in more detail in other sources, such as *Kedushat Levi* on Exodus 3:11 and in *Turei Zahav, Rimzei Rosh Hashanah*: The father is teaching his child to walk. Every time the child takes two or three steps toward the father, the father distances himself in order to make the child walk further. So, too, God is a "hiding God" (Isaiah 45:15) in order that one come yet closer to Him.

²¹⁴ Psalms 48:15.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

While the *ma'amarim* of the Besht are rooted in the traditional, theistic framework of normative Judaism, they draw primarily from kabbalistic and panentheistic conceptualizations of the Divine, which are generally non-theistic. The presence of such abstract and experientially-oriented religious language has yet to be taken seriously in modern Jewish thought. The influence of existentialism on theology in the earlier part of the twentieth century made personalistic language seem attractive. Even such figures as Martin Buber and Abraham Joshua Heschel, so steeped in the study of Hasidism, mostly ignored its abstract theological language, favoring instead the biblical metaphors of personal relationship between God and Israel (later universalized as "man".)

Only since the mid-twentieth century has the historical research of Israeli scholars begun to render Hasidic materials accessible. Also, the influence of mysticism on the intellectual life of the West has created an atmosphere in which non-theistic religious terminology is of increased interest. The "death of God" movement, although short-lived, helped to underscore the fact that traditional metaphors for God as "Father" or "King" are increasingly at odds with the worldview and spiritual sensitivities of the postmodern era. In the 1970s, the feminist critique of religious language also pointed up the inadequacy of these terms, not only because they are masculine in gender but because they represent a patronizing authority that is no longer culturally acceptable.

The Besht's non-theistic and experientially-oriented conceptualization of the Divine, which we frequently encountered in *Keter Shem Tov*, could be important in contemporary Jewish thought for a number of reasons. It allows one to view religious

awareness as an added or deepened perception of the world, one that complements rather than contradicts ordinary and profane perception. It seems to be nurtured by an openness to a more profound rung of human consciousness, rather than calling for the “leap of faith” requisite for theism. The theology that would emerge from such a “reappropriated Hasidism” could be more closely characterized as a form of religious naturalism, insofar as it entails no literal belief in a deity that is willful or active in human affairs. On the other hand, it is a naturalism deeply tempered by a sense of the supernatural, an openness to the profundities of inner experience, and a humility grounded in our recognition of the limits of human knowledge.

As in traditional Hasidism, there should be room in the Reform movement for such non-theistic paradigms to coexist with the more ancient religious language of Judaism. On the one hand, our modern awareness of the strong projection element in our personal metaphors for God should not be incapacitating. At times, our need to call out as humans to the infinite may require that we picture it as human. At the same time, however, the conceptualization of God as King is only one metaphor among many, even if it is the dominant metaphor in rabbinic Judaism, of which we regard ourselves as heirs.

The essence of Hasidism lies in the overwhelming experience of the all-pervasive presence of God. We have seen how the constant striving for this experience, and the mystical awareness of one’s own ultimate identity, is reflected in the *ma’amarim* of the Ba’al Shem Tov. Also reflected is his ability to construct a conceptual framework, building on the foundations of earlier generations, that could support the cultivation and attainment of his religious ideals.

Currently we in the Reform movement are in need of a conceptual framework that is compatible with the experience and sensitivities of a secularized Jewish population. It is quite possible that the homiletical literature of early Hasidism, of which *Keter Shem Tov* is but one example, will prove to be a wellspring of language and ideas that have remarkable viability for a contemporary theology of Judaism.

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